

ソードアート・オンライン11

アリシゼーション・ターニング

キリトが謎のファンタジー世界に入り込み、二年が過ぎた。

《北セントリア帝立修剣学院》の《上級修剣士》となったキリトと親友ユージオの二人は、人界最強の秩序執行者《整合騎士》を目指し、修行の日々を過ごしていた。

《上級修剣士》の二人には、身の周りの世話役があてがわれる。キリトにはロニエ、ユージオにはティーゼ。四人は互いに絆を結び、充実した修士生活を過ごしていた——その時。

突然、《悪意》はやってきた。

ロニエとティーゼが、下劣な貴族達の罠に嵌められる。それを知ったユージオは彼らに対して剣を抜こうとするも、教会への信仰心で身体が動かない。その時、ユージオの右目を凄まじい激痛が貫き、奇妙なしるしが浮かび上がる。

それは、ユージオには読めない神聖文字の羅列だった。

——【SYSTEM ALERT】。



か-16-24



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川原礫

電撃文庫

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かわはら れき
川原 礫

毎年決まって11月の上旬に軽めの風邪を引くのです。
なのでその時期は特に気を付けてるんですがそれでも
回避できないのです。今年もキッチリ頂きました。

【電撃文庫作品】

アクセル・ワールド 1～12

ソードアート・オンライン 1～11

ソードアート・オンライン プログレッシブ1

イラスト: abec

あべし?

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「UH...EU...OOH...!
I, I...!」

「N-NO... NO...
NO...!」

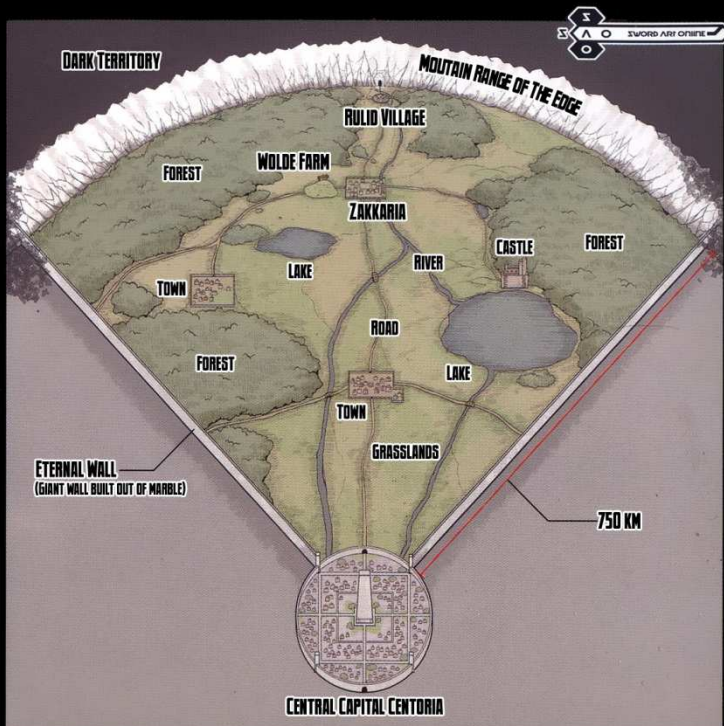
「NO... HELP...
HELP, EUGEO-SENPAI!
EUGEO-SENPAI---!」



「I AM THE OVERSEER OF CENTORIA,
AN INTEGRITY KNIGHT OF THE AXIOM
CHURCH--- ALICE SYNTHESIS THIRTY.」

ALICE AN «INTEGRITY KNIGHT»
WHO PROTECTS ORDER IN
THE «HUMAN WORLD».

「...ALICE...? IS THAT YOU...?
ARE YOU... ALICE...?」



《NORTH CENTORIA MASTER SWORD ACADEMY AND INTEGRITY KNIGHTS》

LOCATED IN THE CENTER OF THE UNDERWORLD'S (HUMAN WORLD) IS THE LARGEST CITY OF THE HUMAN WORLD, THE 《CAPITAL CENTORIA》. IT IS ENCLOSED WITHIN A PERFECT CIRCULAR RAMPART WITH A DIAMETER OF TEN KILOMETER, AND POSSESSES A POPULATION OF OVER TWENTY THOUSAND. THE SOLID WALLS IN THE SHAPE OF AN X DIVIDE THE CIRCULAR CITY INTO FOUR EQUAL PARTS, AND THESE SEPARATING WALLS ARE CALLED THE 《ETERNAL WALL》. 《NORTH CENTORIA》, 《EAST CENTORIA》, 《SOUTH CENTORIA》, AND 《WEST CENTORIA》 ARE WHAT THE DIVIDED MUNICIPALITIES ARE CALLED. THEY ARE THE CAPITALS OF THE FOUR EMPIRES WHICH DIVIDE AND RULE OVER THE VAST HUMAN WORLD.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE 《CAPITAL》 IS THE PURE WHITE GRAND TOWER THAT LIES AT THE HEART OF THE HUMAN WORLD. THE AXION CHURCH'S 《CENTRAL CATHEDRAL》. THE TOWER IS SO TALL ITS ZENITH IS HAZY AND CAN'T BE SEEN, AND THE SQUARE GROUNDS OF THE CHURCH ARE ENCLOSED BY A HIGH WALL, SO IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SEE WHAT LIES INSIDE. THE 《ETERNAL WALL》 THAT DIVIDES THE CITY OF CENTORIA STARTS FROM THE CATHEDRAL, AND STRETCHES OUTWARD IN FOUR DIRECTIONS.

WITHIN THE HIGHEST RULING SYSTEM (AXION CHURCH) THERE ARE OFFICERS KNOWN AS 《INTEGRITY KNIGHTS》. AND THESE KNIGHTS THAT MAINTAIN THE ORDER OF THE WORLD ARE THE SACRED TASK THAT ALL THE SWORDSMEN OF THE WORLD ASPIRE TO.

IF ONE PASSED THE ENTRANCE EXAM OF THE SWORDSMEN TRAINING INSTITUTION (NORTH CENTORIA MASTER SWORD ACADEMY) IN ORDER TO AIM FOR THE RANK OF 《INTEGRITY KNIGHT》, THEY BECOME A 《BEGINNER TRAINEE SWORDSMAN》 IN PUBLIC. THE TRAINEES TRAIN THEMSELVES DILIGENTLY OVER THE PERIOD OF ONE YEAR, AND AT THE END OF EVERY ACADEMY YEAR, THEY AIM FOR BECOMING SWORDSMEN OF EVEN HIGHER RANK DURING THE PROMOTION EXAM. THE FINAL OBJECTIVE OF THE ACADEMY STUDENTS IS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE 《NORTHERN EMPIRE SWORDSMANSHIP TOURNAMENT》. KIRITO AND EUGEN ARE AIMING TO WIN THE COMPETITION EVEN HIGHER THAN THAT, THE 《FOUR EMPIRES UNITY TOURNAMENT》 THAT IS THE HIGHEST SWORDSMANSHIP TOURNAMENT IN THE HUMAN WORLD, WHERE THE WINNERS ARE APPOINTED AS HONORABLE 《INTEGRITY KNIGHTS》.

Chapter 5 - Seal of the Right Eye (5th Month of Human World Calendar 380)

Part 1

«Underworld».

That is the name of this world. It is not in the Common Tongue, but in the Sacred Tongue, so most of its inhabitants live on without realizing the connotations that come with the name.

The «Human World» draws a perfect circle with a diameter of one and a half thousand kilolu right in the middle of Underworld. Its circumference is surrounded by the «Mountain Range at the Edge» and beyond that, the country of darkness where demi-humans such as goblins and orcs live, «Dark Territory» continues outwards—that was the common belief, but practically no human can claim to have seen that with their own eyes.

The Human World was split into four empires and the one that ruled over the north was the «Norlangarth North Empire», with its fertile grasslands, deep forests and many lakes. On the southern tip of the empire's fan-shaped circular sector, at the part close to its focal point, was the capital of the empire, «North Centoria». The other three empires were structured in the exact same manner, so the four capitals were joined into a single, small disc at the heart of the Human World, collectively called, «Central Centoria».

Once again, at the heart of Centoria, was the lofty white tower of the «Worldwide Central Axiom Church» that held authority over all four empires, ruling over the Human World with the absolute law; the «Taboo Index», and with the absolute military might; the «Integrity Knights». The structure that boasted of a splendor that almost reached Solus in the sky could be said to be the heart of the Human World, in every sense of the word. In other words, it was likely that it could be said to be the heart of Underworld itself.

This was the form of the world, as understood by Eugeo.

It had already been two years since he had set out on that journey southward with his partner, Kirito, from the small village of Rulid at the northern tip of the northern empire until the spring of this current year.

And they were given appointments in the guard squadron of the largest city in the northern region, then they had advanced to the central capital with letters of recommendation personally written by their commanding officer early in the spring of the previous year. Overcoming the entrance examination for the most prominent swordsman training institution in the empire, «North Centoria Sword Mastery Academy», and diligently tempering themselves in the one year they had served as novice trainees, they had even been among the ranks of the top twelve in the promotion examination at the end of the year.

Those twelve would be appointed not as advanced trainees, but as honor students known as «elite swordsmen-in-training». They were provided with a dormitory with a connected spacious practice arena for their exclusive use, and were freed from much of the minor academy regulations, spending that single year immersed in training for the right to participate in the «Empire Swordsmanship Tournament», the ultimate goal of all of the academy students.

Going through specialized lessons and swordsmanship tuition, followed by self-practice each day was difficult, but those days were like a dream to Eugeo. If he hadn't met that strange young man named Kirito two years ago, he would now be living each day swinging an axe to chop wood from day to night, continuing that «sacred task» until he retired from old age. He was able to proceed towards his

goal, associating with the young nobles in the central capital, learning swordsmanship and sacred arts, even if it's a little at a time.

Unlike his fellow students, Eugeo's goal was not merely to emerge as the champion of the «Four Empires Unity Tournament» and be commissioned as an honorable integrity knight.

It was to become a knight and pass through the door to the Axiom Church's Central Cathedral that even a first class aristocrat could not step into... to once again meet, Alice Schuberg, a female childhood friend of his who was taken away to the Cathedral long ago.

He had once given up; the one who had shown him the path towards that wish of his, far, far away, was his partner, Kirito. They had overcome every obstacle that stood in their way with their combined might over these two years. With Eugeo teaching the various rules to Kirito who had lost his memory, beginning with the Empire Fundamental Law, and Kirito teaching Eugeo his unique swordsmanship, the «Aincrad-style», they had survived to this day with their pace in sync, as though they were brothers... no, twins.

Even now, as elite swordsmen-in-training, Eugeo and Kirito still live in the same room in the dormitory. That said, they share only the living room with their bedrooms separate. Eugeo still held feelings of guilt over the wide and soft beds that even those from his home in Rulid could not hold a candle to, the extravagant baths where he could use as much hot water as he liked and the plentiful meals served at the dining hall reserved for those like them, but it seems Kirito had gotten used to it in no time.

But there was one matter that he suffered as much as Eugeo with.

The privileges granted to the mere twelve elite swordsmen-in-training of the academy were not limited to the exclusive dormitories. One individual, an exemplary novice trainee would also take care of them as their «valet». Eugeo had also been assigned as well, to a broadminded senior swordsman the previous year, and that had been no bother at all... or rather, he had even thought of it as enjoyable, but it became a different story when the roles were reversed.

For the trainee assigned as his valet this year was Tiezé Shtolienen, born in a sixth class noble family, not to mention a girl who had just attained the age of sixteen. As for Kirito, the one who had become his valet was Ronye Arabel, a sixteen years old girl also born in a sixth class noble family; those two were a cause of much distress for the two from the countryside.

He had absolutely no complaints about Tiezé herself. The girl, with hair red like flames and eyes slightly tinged red; both of which were somewhat rare in the north, was always full of energy, possessing much enthusiasm and diligence and had caused many situations where the mentor, Eugeo, had ended up learning from the apprentice instead. However—being waited on by someone three years younger, not to mention of noble birth and a female as well, does not seem to be something he could get used to at this point in time. Each day was spent with his thoughtful "I'll take care of that, don't worry about it" to which Tiezé would retort "No, this should be handled by your valet!".

Kirito's situation was mostly the same, and he would make up some arbitrary excuse to disappear whenever Ronye came to tidy up the room; that happened many times during this one month—however.

Today—the 17th day of the 5th month of the Human World Calendar 380, Kirito finally returned without any particular reason just as Tiezé and Ronye had finished cleaning the room, holding onto a large paper bag in his arms. Inside was a heap of honey pies from a well-established restaurant in the 3rd Eastern Street of the 6th District in North Centoria, «The Deer Leap», which was famous for them, and

Kirito took two out for Eugeo and himself before handing the rest to Tiezé and Ronye with a "Go have them with everyone in your room".

Novice trainees were restricted from going out on non-rest days, and of course, were then unable to buy sweets at the market. The two girls were exceedingly happy at the unexpected refreshments, which lead to Eugeo seeing them run back to the novice trainees' dormitory for the first time.

Forming bonds with the valet trainees and giving them general advice on how to make progress on their swordsmanship were part of the swordsmen-in-training's duties as well, so those honey pies might be a part of Kirito's efforts—but even so, Eugeo thought while staring at his black-haired partner by his side, who consumed the pie with a composed expression before speaking.

"Well now. Eugeo-kun, how about some light practice before dinner?"

"I have no objection to that at all. But tomorrow's the advanced sacred arts exam. And aside from the written segment, there's that «cryogenic element» generation practical that you're bad at."

"Ugh....."

Kirito's arm, about to grab the wooden sword used for practice, froze after Eugeo pointed that out. It seems he was conflicted for several seconds, unwilling to yield, but Kirito soon lowered his hand with a sigh, before voicing out in a usually deep pitch.

"Geez, why do I have to study for exams after coming this far..."

What Kirito said was true, he certainly couldn't even imagine that he would be learning sacred arts in the central capital back when he was swinging an axe to chop wood at Rulid Village. He completely agreed that sword practice was more fun than memorizing complicated spells, but with continuous failures in the academic tests, the qualifications to get a recommendation for the tournament would be out of reach regardless of how good their swordsmanship was.

—And Eugeo's partner, who should have understood all of that to be fact without him explaining it, combed his hair, as jet-black as his uniform, upwards before speaking in a flat tone.

"Eugeo-kun. I will now cram with all my might for this entire night until lights-out, so would you be ever so kind and bring my portion of food from the dining hall?"

"Understood. ...You should've simply done it bit by bit like normal."

"I couldn't agree more on that matter. However, there are people who are unable to do that, you know..."

Leaving that oddly philosophical remark behind, Kirito trudged through the living room and vanished into his own room through the door to the north.

Unlike the novice trainees' dormitory that they had been living in until one and a half months ago, the elite swordsmen-in-training's dormitory was in the shape of a perfect circle. It was a three-story building with an atrium in the center, a corridor forming a ring around it indoors, and the rooms where the twelve swordsmen-in-training stayed were lined up on the outer edge to the south.

The first floor had the dining hall and a large bath, while the second and third floors each had six residences for the students. It was set up to have one living room shared with every two rooms and the residence for Eugeo and Kirito was on the third floor.

The rooms were automatically arranged based on the placing in the combined examinations of the first school year, with the first place in room 301, on the eastern-most side of the third floor, second in room 302... and continuing with that allocation, the twelfth was placed in room 206, on the second

floor. As Eugeo's room was 305 and Kirito's was 306, which meant that Eugeo was 5th among the 120 novice trainees, while Kirito had attained 6th with his scores.

The two were successful in being granted connecting rooms half through intention, but the other half was merely good luck. Of course, they had first attempted to dominate the 1st and 2nd place for themselves—but they had no choice but to settle for lower than that, even when they had tried their hardest—Kirito placed 4th in the official match with the instructors, while Eugeo could only get 5th place, which had ended up making them fret over getting separated rooms, but Kirito lost more points in the style performance and sacred arts examination, getting 6th place.

As a result, the objective of getting connected rooms was achieved, but worries of a different kind were left behind.

After all, in one year... no, there were only ten months left until they had to graduate the academy ranked 1st and 2nd, so as to receive the rights to participate in the Empire Swordsmanship Tournament. Kirito was 7th and Eugeo, 8th, when they had entered, so they had improved, but considering how there were still four others to go, it certainly was no time to be optimistic.

But on the other hand, Kirito was calm, acting as though becoming an elite swordsman-in-training was as good as having won already. It wasn't like there was no basis for that confidence; what determined the ranks for swordsmen-in-training would not be the usual examinations that used combined scores, but the «official matches» that occurred four times a year. These matches would not be against instructors but amongst the students instead, so grading criteria and such would be ignored, making victory over their opponent the main goal.

And that abnormal-in-various-aspects partner of his had obtained a magnificent victory in a first strike match, when they were still novice trainees a mere two months ago, against the head elite swordsman-in-training back then. In actual fact, it was ruled as a draw by the umpire, but that was unmistakably Kirito's win. Not to mention the opponent he crossed swords with was the heir to a second class noble family that had served as swordsmanship instructors for the Imperial Knight Order for generations, an unbelievable Mighty Sword user.

He had been taught the Aincrad-style swordsmanship known only by that Kirito for over two years now, so it wasn't like Eugeo had no faith in his own sword. However, it was another story if you were to ask him if he could be as assured as his partner was. Even on the day before a written examination, he had no intention of skipping out on his daily training.

His usual practice partner had retired to his own room to cram for the entire night, so Eugeo exited the room with nothing but his own wooden sword in hand.

On the other side of the inner corridor stretching out into a large circle was the atrium that extended from the first floor through to this third floor, with the deep red sunset skies visible through the round skylight above. There wasn't such an indulgent building in the town of Zakkaria, let alone Rulid Village where he was from. Even the floorboards were made from polished, high quality wood and numerous pieces of art were hung along the curved walls, the empire's history as their theme.

—No matter how I tell them that I'm living in such a majestic building, even having someone exclusively assigned to aid me, none of my elder brothers back home would believe me, huh.

Eugeo's thoughts drifted as he went through the long corridor.

We may be elite swordsmen-in-training, but this level of hospitality was already being shown to mere students. If I was a veteran swordsman, frequently displaying good results at the Unity Tournament—or beyond that, one of the integrity knights of the Axiom Church, holding onto more authority than even those from the households of the four emperors, just what sort of luxurious lifestyle would I lead?

"...Oof, not good."

Eugeo rapped himself on the head with the wooden sword he had rested on his shoulder.

A year had passed since he had enrolled and perhaps due to getting a little used to the life at the academy, there were times when he was about to lose sight of the feelings he held when he set out on this journey from the village. He was not here to gain fame or honor as a swordsman.

"...Alice..."

As if he was advising himself, he muttered the name precious to him.

Living here, winning in the official matches, and even his aim to become an integrity knight, none of those were the end result, but only the process. To take back that blonde childhood friend of his, who should be confined somewhere within the Axiom Church's Central Cathedral—

After descending to the first floor through the stairs constructed on the northern side of the building, Eugeo headed towards the exclusive practice arena beside the dormitory. This too, was one of the privileges of the elite swordsmen-in-training. He had swung his wooden sword in either a large, crowded practice hall or an open-air outdoor training field back when he was a novice trainee, but now he was able to practice indoors in a bright and spacious area, for as long as he liked.

Opening the door at the end of a short passage, the refreshing scent of the annually refurbished floors welcomed Eugeo. Standing still, he was about to inhale it before he stopped his breath. He could sense a faint, sticky smell mixed into the air.

When he got out of the small changing room, into the practice arena, those foreboding feelings turned to reality.

The two male students positioned right in the middle of the vast wooden floor noticed Eugeo and turned to look at him with blunt scowls. Perhaps in the midst of style practice, one of them stayed still with his wooden sword held aloft, while the other was adjusting his stance, but then both of them dropped their arms in an unnatural motion.

You don't have to be that cautious, I won't be stealing your techniques; muttering that thought in his mind, Eugeo simply gave a light nod and started walking towards a corner of the practice arena. He figured they would ignore him as usual, but for some reason tonight, the ones who had arrived earlier took a step forward and opened their mouths to speak.

"My, Swordsman-in-training Eugeo... you're alone tonight?"

The one who called out was the man with his sword raised overhead. A garish red uniform covered his burly and tall body while his long and wavy blonde hair hung down. A delighted smile settled on his well-ordered face lacking any flaws, but that intentional pause after «Eugeo»^[1] was to call attention to Eugeo's origins as a peasant with no family name.

Responding to harassment of this level would only serve to reduce the time he had for practice, so Eugeo returned the greeting with a contrived expression.

"Good evening, Swordsman-in-training Antinous. Yes, unfortunately, my roommate is..."

However, those words were interrupted by the other male student's shrill scream.

"How rude! When addressing Raio-dono by name, be sure to add in the «Head Swordsman-in-training»!"

Turning to the man wearing a pale yellow uniform with his grey hair plastered in oil, he performed a slight bow despite being fed up as one would expect.

"My humble apologies, Swordsman-in-training Zizek."

At that moment, the man immediately lost his temper and shouted after a step forward.

"And you dare repeat that insolence! When addressing me, you must add in the «second-ranked» as well! Or do you have no regard for the history and traditions of this honorable swordsmanship academy..."

"Come now, no need to speak any further, Humbert."

His shoulder was then patted from behind, making him quickly close his mouth and back off.

As indicated by those words earlier, this grey-haired Humbert Zizek was the second-ranked elite swordsman-in-training among the twelve students living in this dormitory. And the blonde male, Raio Antinous, was the head elite swordsman-in-training, ranked first. In other words, the month before last, Raio took over the position of the previous head who fought a fierce battle with Kirito, Uolo Levanteinn.

Despite how unlike Uolo; who had the air of a stoic military man, Raio was, who was a man who could not be said to be any closer to the very image of one from the higher ranks of nobility with the vanity that he exhibited, their command over swords were remarkably similar. That might only be natural, considering how they used the same, «High Norkia Style»; though it wasn't pleasant knowing that the sophisticated, if speaking in a positive light, or devious, in a negative, Raio was trained in the Mighty Sword designed to down in one hit, just like Uolo.

Kirito had mentioned this previously during a discussion over the matter. That half of that might behind the swords of students born in the higher ranks of nobility were from the huge pride they had nurtured since childhood. Raio's dedication towards swordsmanship and his intensity of training could not even reach Uolo's heels, but his pride surpassed the latter's by far. Thus, there was that abominable and almost viscous weight behind Raio's sword.

—However, could the word, pride, be interpreted to mean self-esteem? If they have that much self-esteem, why would they persist in such shallow harassment?

When Eugeo had rebutted him so, unconvinced, Kirito had then replied after pondering for a short moment.

—Self-esteem is the continuous judgement of oneself. But pride is not limited to merely that. Raio and the rest must have cultivated that pride through comparing themselves with others. Hence, they show contempt to us who weren't born as nobles or even born in the central capital. Or approaching it from the opposite angle, they are unable to maintain that precious pride of theirs without doing so.

Those words from Kirito were rather complex to Eugeo, but he interpreted it as the more he fed Raio's and Humbert's pride by being meek, the stronger their swords would get.

The thought that he might as well answer in a provocative and arrogant manner did come to mind, but unlike his partner, Eugeo had neither the knack of determining where the limits for violating the academy's regulations lie, nor the inclination to pick unnecessary fights in the first place.

Thus, although Eugeo was slightly ashamed of his obedient nature, he still gave a quick bow to show gratitude before heading towards the corner of the practice arena once again.

Upon stepping across the plain wooden floorboards which were newly cut from the forest near the central capital with plenty of Life remaining, those nasty feelings gradually faded away. In the central capital where nearly all buildings were made from stone, a place to enjoy the aroma of fresh wood was precious.

—Raio and Humbert have probably learnt swordsmanship from a private tutor since they were young, but even I've hit that Gigas Cedar two thousand times daily for seven years back in Rulid Forest. I might not have enough pride, but I definitely have self-esteem. ...Well, I wasn't waving a sword around though, but an axe.

With those thoughts in mind, he stopped in front of the logs meant for self-practice, standing beside the wall on the west side. These were replaced as well, at the same time as the floor, with barely any dents on their surfaces.

Holding the wooden sword made from platinum oak in his two hands, he took up the basic middle stance and regulated his breathing.

"Tsh!"

He swung down the wooden sword from overhead with a short yell. The thud of a heavy impact rang out and the log with a diameter of thirty centimeters quivered to its very core after being hit on its right.

Feeling the pleasant feedback from his hands, he took a step back and swung the sword down from the left side this time. Next, the right side, then the left again. After striking it for as many as ten times, everything then vanished from his cognizance aside from his own body and sword, and the log as well.

The practice Eugeo went through each night was to execute these downward swings from left and right for a total of four hundred times. He did not carry out any revision for the complex styles taught during the day exercises, like those that Raio and company were doing earlier. This was because his partner, and mentor as well, Kirito, said that there was no need for it.

—In this world, what's important is to put something into your sword.

When teaching Eugeo swordsmanship, he tended to voice that out.

—The «secret moves» of the Norkia-style, the Valtio-style, and our Aincrad-style are powerful. After all, you just have to understand the activation method and the sword will partially move all by itself. However, the problem lies before that. The number of matches where secret moves will go against secret moves, like when I fought against Uolo, will likely increase from now on. In that case, the rest will be determined by the weight behind the sword.

Weight.

Even Eugeo understood that it was not a word that referred simply to the weight of the sword itself.

The one who Kirito had fought against, Uolo Levanteinn, put the self-esteem and heavy responsibility from being born in a family that instructed the Knight Order in swordsmanship into his sword. The senior that Eugeo served for a year as his valet, Gorgolosso Baltoh, used the confidence from the body of steel he had trained. The student that guided Kirito, Sortiliena Serlut, used her expertise in the techniques that she honed. And lastly, Raio and Humbert had converted their pride as upper class nobles into the weight of their swords.

Then, what should I put into my sword?

Eugeo had asked without thinking and Kirito then replied with his usual smirk. You would have to find that out yourself, he said. But perhaps he thought that saying that alone was too irresponsible, as he continued on; you won't be finding it even if you do style practice the whole time.

That was the reason behind the earnest striking practice Eugeo repeated day after day while on the journey towards Centoria, and even after gaining admission to the Sword Mastery Academy. Because all Eugeo had, as he was neither a noble nor a swordsman, were the years of experience sincerely swinging an axe in that forest south of Rulid.

No, there was actually one other thing.

The desire to recover Alice who was taken away by the Axiom Church. Even while swinging this wooden sword at this moment, the vestige of his blonde-haired childhood friend alone would not disappear from his mind. He believed it must have been the same back when he was chopping down the Gigas Cedar in his hometown's forest.

It would be eight years soon, since that day in the summer.

When the integrity knight who had given his name as Deusolbert Synthesis Seven took away Alice, all Eugeo had done was to look on. Although he held onto the «Dragon Bone Axe» that could even sever iron at that time, he wasn't able to even brandish it. Despite how someone right beside him... a boy around the same age was screaming in desperation. Asking if he could really accept that.

That's right... who exactly was that? There shouldn't have been any other friends of his that had called his name in that manner aside from Alice. Even so, he could still recall those youthful shouts reverberating faintly, deep within his ears.

Automatically counting the number of strikes in a corner of his mind, Eugeo dived deep, deep into his memory; then it happened.

"Oh my, Eugeo-dono's practice is as mysterious as always, is it not?"

That amused voice echoed behind him and threw Eugeo's concentration into disarray. The sword's trajectory deviated slightly and an unpleasant recoil numbed his hands akin to when he had made a blunder swinging the axe during his woodcutting days.

Despite how there should have been quite a distance between Eugeo in the corner of the vast practice arena and Raios' group in the exact middle, the fact that the sound was that clear would be because they were intentionally raising their voices to make him hear. He should have been fed up of listening to their sarcasm by now, but he could only consider it shameful of himself for his emotions to be swayed, even now. Ignore them, ignore them; Eugeo tried to convince himself and was about to continue swinging his sword—

"Are you not curious about what meaning there is for Eugeo-dono to do that night after night, swinging that stick without style or finesse, Humbert?"

"I concur, Raios-dono."

Their exchange reached his ears again as they had intended and they went so far as to start snickering; even though he couldn't resort to physical means, he still gave a reply within his mind.

—And you're as spirited as always, though only when Kirito isn't around, Raios-kun.

Since the month before last, they have stopped the direct provocations whenever Eugeo and Kirito were together for some reason. In exchange, the scorn Eugeo received when he was alone accordingly increased, but it didn't seem to be because they found Eugeo easy to deal with, but because they were spooked by Kirito.

Apparently, something occurred between Kirito and them around the end of their novice trainee period, but his partner would only claim that it was merely "a slight quarrel" when he asked and of course, he couldn't ask Raios directly either. What seemed related though, was how Raios and Humbert had strangely pale faces on when they saw Kirito give an unusual potted blue flower to Sortiliena-senpai after the graduation ceremony last month, but he had absolutely no idea about the significance behind it.

Anyway, he could get by without being hassled by them when together with Kirito, which was something he had no qualms with. However, he couldn't very well hide in the shadow of his partner forever, having become an elite swordsman-in-training now.

The year's first official match was only a month away, in the middle of the sixth month. The final rankings may be decided based on just the one right before graduation, but a complete loss to Raios and his ally would only create unease in his future. A major reversal like how the Swordswoman-in-training Sortiliena who was always ranked second overthrew the immovable head, Uolo Levanteinn, in the final match was not common at all—or so, Gorgolosso had said in high spirits, as though it had concerned him personally.

The head this year, Raios, and the second-ranked, Humbert, were warriors who had received special training in the High Norkia-style since they were young, just like Uolo. Their characters were utterly unworthy of respect, but their swordsmanship would probably be a head above that of the other noble students. To be honest, even with only a month to go until the match, he still could not find that something he should put in his sword that would be capable of competing against their Mighty Sword.

—But at the very least, I definitely won't lose to you guys in terms of number of sword swings.

Ending his pensive thoughts and the four hundredth strike at the same time, Eugeo slowly straightened his body.

He removed a towel from his belt and first wiped clean his wooden sword. Next, he wiped off the sweat that had soaked down from his forehead to his nape while taking fleeting glances behind. Raios and his cohort were practicing in the middle of the practice arena as always, apparently reviewing the forms of each other's styles.

The moment he turned back and took a breath of air, the «Bell of Time Telling» that hung at the academy's main auditorium tower rang out the melody for 6 P.M., the same way the bell at the church back home did. The swordsmen-in-training's dormitory left much to the students' discretion, unlike the trainees' dormitory that was full of regulations, so dinner could be taken anytime from six to eight. Hence, a little more practice was perfectly possible, but he had to bring food back to the room for his partner who was hard at work studying for the tests today.

—Come to think of it, that Kirito didn't tell me what he wanted to eat. If there are those pickled tsubu gourds he's bad with, I'll get him an extra-large serving.

When he tucked the towel and wooden sword into his belt with those thoughts in mind and started walking towards the entryway, Raios spoke with his sword aloft, at a volume he could hear.

"My, it seems that Swordsman-in-training Eugeo plans to only hit that log, without conducting any style practice."

Without missing a beat, Humbert followed up.

"Raios-dono, from what I hear, it seems that Eugeo-dono was a woodcutter somewhere in the boondocks. Perhaps he doesn't know how to deal with anything except a log for an opponent?"

"I would have never known. If those are his circumstances, might it be best of us to offer our guidance for a single form at least, as fellow disciples of the same dormitory?"

"Oh, such magnanimity from you, Raios-dono, you're truly a model of the aristocrats!"

Eugeo restrained himself from sighing at the seemingly premeditated exchange that played out and tried to continue on his way. However, Humbert then addressed him directly, so he had no choice but to reluctantly halt his steps.

"How about it, Eugeo-dono. As Raios-dono mentioned, how about some guidance? You won't be given such a rare chance ever again."

With the matter having progressed this far, he couldn't feign ignorance and walk away any longer. Intentionally ignoring a conversation targeted at him would be the same as an act of disrespect. Primarily, the authority to punish held by elite swordsmen-in-training could only be used on novice and advanced trainees, so Humbert couldn't order any sort of punishment onto Eugeo, but there was still the possibility of submitting a complaint to the academy's management.

As such, Eugeo thought to take his leave with the single phrase, "Don't mind me" but another idea came to mind.

This might possibly be a good opportunity.

Raios and Humbert were the head and second-ranked elite swordsmen-in-training—in other words, they were the strongest and second strongest swordsmen among the students in the academy. Even Kirito said, "Don't make light of those guys" every now and then, so he had absolutely no intention of looking down on the pair's true strength.

But at the present moment, Eugeo found Raios and his comrade's usage of «pride as a source of strength» to be incomprehensible. Boasting about their high social status, looking down on students born in noble families below theirs or those of commoners, ridiculing them... should that nature of theirs really grant power to their swords? If he were to accept that, then wouldn't it blemish the «feelings of respect and affection towards others» taught to him by his parents, Sister Azariya from the church, Gasupht the village chief, and lastly, his childhood friend, Alice, when he was young?

Even now, when Eugeo was openly shown looks of scorn, he did not think to neglect the minimum amount of respect—affection was a little impossible though—for Raios and Humbert. However, if that attitude were to feed their pride, if it were to increase the force behind their swords even further, it would really be wasted on them.

That said, he didn't have even the slightest intention to choose a way of life similar to those two and scorn others... this was what he wished to find out before the official match next month. What exactly was the strength born from pride? Having them offer guidance on their own accord like right now could be a chance.

Eugeo quickly considered it in his head and added on an "It seems like what that Kirito would think up, huh" to his thoughts, before he opened his once-closed mouth.

"...This certainly might be the only chance to do so. Then could you allow me to accept your offer and receive your guidance, please?"

At that moment, Raios and Humbert both raised their eyebrows. It seems Eugeo's reaction was unexpected, but they soon curled their lips up into a faint grin.

First, Humbert spread his arms wide open and declared in a shrill voice.

"Haha, of course it is of no trouble! Now then, hurry and show us your form over there. That's right, let's start with the basics, try something like «Fierce Blaze Style, Third Form»..."

"No, Second-ranked Swordsman-in-training Zizek-dono."

Slightly sticking up his right hand, Eugeo spoke, cautiously picking his words.

"Given the rare opportunity, I wish to experience the Second-ranked Zizek-dono's esteemed sword with my own body, rather than have a review on forms."

".....What did you say?"

The sneer immediately left Humbert's face. In exchange, suspicion of Eugeo's intentions and the cruelty a wild beast displays as it torments its prey with its claws, showed themselves.

"Experience, with your body... you say? In other words... do you have the desire to be struck by my sword, Swordsman-in-training Eugeo?"

"Of course, I would like to ask for you to stop immediately before you do so, but I am the one who requested guidance, after all. Asking for any more on your part would be impertinent of me."

"Oh now, I see, I see. So, you're suggesting that you do not object to ending it only after the first strike?"

The neatly combed down grey hair looked as though they slightly bristled. Those eyes, thin even under normal circumstances, narrowed even further to nearly lines, with a brutal leer focusing deep within them. It seems Eugeo's overly respectful manner of speaking had aroused his sadistic anticipation.

"True, it is only my duty as the second-ranked swordsman-in-training as well as one born in a fourth class noble family, to respond to a plea for instruction. Very well, I shall show you my sword techniques, Eugeo-dono."

The minute he said so, he unsheathed the wooden sword at his side, in his belt, in an exaggerated motion. It was made of the same platinum oak as Eugeo's, but elaborate patterns were engraved onto the side of its blade.

With Humbert by his side acting in that manner, Raio first thought to say something to him, but perhaps thinking better of it, immediately shut his mouth. Taking slow steps backwards until he was three meters away, he nodded with a vague smile when Humbert turned to look at him.

Getting more into it with the acknowledgement of his superior, Humbert loosely hung his hands, and pointed his sword tip straight at Eugeo who was standing upright and then shouted.

"Now, here I come! This is the essence of the High Norkia-style... learn it through your body!"

Spreading his feet out front and back, he held his sword up as though he was resting it atop his shoulder. This stance was the secret move of the Norkia-style, «Lightning Flash Slash». Contradictory to his words earlier, he did not try to use the powerful High Norkia-style «Heavenly Mountain Rending Wave» out of concern for Eugeo's body—no, he probably just didn't want to use it.

That said, Lightning Flash Slash wasn't a technique that could be looked down upon. Even with the edgeless wooden sword, it would reduce a person's Life by half if it struck directly on the head and caused that person to lose consciousness for a while. Of course, «reducing someone else's Life» was a major violation of the Taboo Index, but in a bout agreed on by both parties, the maximum of a single hit could be forgiven. And there was no doubt that Humbert was aiming not to stop before contact, but to deal a full hit.

The craftwork that was the wooden sword brandished by the second-rank swordsman-in-training let out a blue glow. The speed that he activated the secret move with, after entering the stance was as expected of him. However, Eugeo could distinctively predict the path the sword would draw. After all, Lightning Flash Slash was utterly identical to one of the many secret moves of the Aincrad-style swordsmanship, «Vertical».

"...Shrya!!"

With a high-pitched bellow, Humbert's sword charged in.

Right before that, Eugeo moved his right hand as well. Pulling his wooden sword from his left waist, he activated a secret move after an instant of concentration. He went against the opponent's sword that shot down from straight above with a slanted upward slash from below. Aincrad-style, «Slant».

The many secret moves taught by Kirito were all named not in the Common Tongue, but the Sacred Tongue instead, for some reason. It seems that even Kirito himself didn't know why. He likely forgot it due to the memory loss that he had when he appeared at Rulid as a «Lost Child of Vector», but in that case, it was a true stroke of luck that he did not forget his sword techniques as well.

Slant was a single-hit technique just like Lightning Flash Slash, but the ability to attack in two directions, from top-right to bottom-left, or from bottom-left to top-right, was its best feature. Especially the latter, with its stance being the same as the action of drawing a sword from the waist, thus allowing a major reduction in the time required to activate it.

Normally, if the opponent in a duel was spotted using a secret move, there wouldn't be enough time to receive it with another one, so one had no choice but to jump backwards or to the sides with all of one's strength to dodge—though that was rarely successful. But the Slant that Eugeo let out late drew a pale blue streak as it violently collided with Humbert's Lightning Flash Slash in the air, causing noise and light unthinkable for a couple of wooden swords.

"Nuoo...!"

Humbert let out a short cry, but the surprise that showed instantly on his face was converted to wrath and he applied pressure to his sword with all his might. The blue and light blue radiance enveloping the clashing swords had yet to vanish. If either of those swords were to be pushed back a few cen, the secret move would end in that moment and that person would likely be sent flying. Eugeo put his spirit in bracing his feet, pushing the sword in his right hand to the very end.

With a dull grating noise, Humbert's sword drew back by two cen. The blue gleam of the Lightning Flash Slash flickered, implying the end of the skill.

—As I thought, I'm better in terms of pure strength!

It might have been within expectations, but receiving this opportunity to prove it for real gave true meaning to Eugeo. He could not hope to match the motions of the nobles, refined to the extent of even paying attention to the angles that their fingertips were at, but in just this one thing, the physical strength tempered by waving a heavy axe two thousand times day after day in the forest back home, was not something he would lose at. Even Gorgolosso, who boasted about his steel-like body, praised Eugeo's body for being "slender, but masterfully trained".

There were some among the noble students trained in the High Norkia-style who ridiculed the Valtio-style displayed by Gorgolosso, who was born of common folk, as «rural swordsmanship», but putting aside the performance art it was a competition of beautiful, brute strength that served as a splendid weapon for duels. And along with the adaptive Aincrad-style passed on from Kirito, he could bring any situation into a simple clash of swords.

—Even if he had not found «something to put into his sword», with the techniques and strength polished by those two, he wouldn't lose no matter who the high ranked noble was!

Embracing that conviction in his chest, Eugeo put all he had into the swing of his sword.

However, it happened then. Humbert's face, visible beyond the crossed swords, became an eerie countenance that could be described as evil.

"Don't get... ahead of yourself!"

His eyes and eyebrows could be raised no further; a metallic roar of anger burst out from between his bared teeth. At the same time, the blue light that was nearly gone renewed, tinged with shades of dusky black.

Creak. This time, the violent grating was from Eugeo's wooden sword. The pressure on his right arm multiplied with a sharp pain running through his wrist and shoulder. The two cen it had been pushed back by was instantly regained and the two wooden swords clashed back where they had started.

—What is this power!?

Barely stopping it, Eugeo opened his eyes wide. Humbert, who normally doesn't work up much of a sweat and spends all his time inspecting the style forms, even when he comes to the practice arena, should not possess this much strength. If this wasn't physical strength... is this the «pride as a source of strength» that Kirito was talking about? Prizing himself and looking down on others; was the power granted to his sword with that disposition, incompatible with Eugeo's values, and enough to overturn days after days of training?

I can't believe it. I definitely don't want to believe that the God of Creation Stacia could forgive such a way of life.

The moment he tried to deny the phenomenon happening before his own eyes, Humbert bristled his hair with a wicked expression on and murmured.

"Did you think you could beat my sword with a cowardly sneak attack?"

"Co... wardly...?"

"Indeed. What could you call pretending to get beaten before coming out with that skill without a style or anything else, but cowardly?"

"Th... That's wrong! This is my school... this is how the «Aincrad-style» is!"

Eugeo instinctively shouted back. If the High Norkia-style was a school that focused on the force and form of techniques, the Aincrad-style was a practical school that focused on the basic point of landing a hit with the sword beyond anything else. As such, it strives for speed in the activation of secret moves, even possessing «consecutive hit skills» that other schools do not have.

In other words, the idea behind the Aincrad-style was the way of life of its one and only disciple, Kirito, himself. Unglamorous, unpretentious, a straight push on towards the goal. Not giving up even after running into a wall, challenging it again for the second time, the third time. If he wasn't together with him, Eugeo wouldn't have reached the town of Zakkaria, let alone Centoria.

That was why Eugeo vehemently objected to Humbert who concluded that the Aincrad-style was cowardly.

However, the tremors in his heart influenced his sword as well, getting pushed back further. It was Eugeo's turn for the pale blue light surrounding his wooden sword to flash unsteadily. He spread his feet and arched his upper body, desperately trying to hold his position.

Humbert gave a smug smirk and whispered in a voice like that of nails scratching glass.

"The vileness of that school is oozing out from your unsightly appearance. You must be thinking of usurping either Raio-dono or me in the next official match... but that is impossible. I'll crush your right shoulder and make you unable to wave a sword for a while right here."

"Kuh...!"

He clenched his teeth to endure, but the pressure from Humbert's sword continued to intensify. A secret move for swords could continue on for quite some time even if it's forced back, as long as it returns on the same trajectory, but Eugeo's sword was being attacked by Humbert's Lightning Flash Slash from straight above and had already left its original trajectory. If it was pushed back one cen, no, even five millicen more, the Slant would be interrupted and as declared, his right shoulder would suffer a painful blow.

Of course, there was a superb medical office in the Sword Mastery Academy, with various medicines stored there and healers trained in specialized Sacred Arts stationed there as well. However, there was a limit to the effects of medicine and arts and a wound as heavy as a broken bone might not be able to recover instantly, even if a hazardous Sacred Art like directly transferring Life from another was used. If he were to receive such a wound now, there was no way he could show up at the official match in the coming month—...

—What am I, stupid?! How can a swordsman be afraid of injury!!

Eugeo shook off the fear creeping into his heart in an instant and concentrated all of his consciousness into his sword.

Despite having the chance to leave, the one who had responded to Humbert's provocation and picked a duel was himself. He felt it was too shameful of himself, getting shaken by his opponent's words and being afraid of failure despite that. If he were to draw his sword, he would have to be determined to use up all of his skill and strength and let things fall into place. That's the spirit behind the Aincrad-style.

—And, I have still yet to use up all that I have.

Focusing not on Humbert, a sadistic smile forming on his face, but purely on the existence of the wooden sword held in his right hand instead. The toughness and weight, the warped and sore parts of the evergreen oak that created it made themselves known to his arm and he even felt the power behind the Slant, on the verge of vanishing, as subtle vibrations.

Make yourself one with the sword. That was what his close friend and teacher, Kirito, had always said.

He was not quite at that stage yet, but perhaps thanks to the daily practice swings, he felt like he could sense something similar to the voice of the sword every now and then. Not there, this is how you should move, that was how it spoke.

And now too, Eugeo heard the whispers of the sword—or so, he thought.

It would only be natural to be cut down if all he did was to receive a skill coming from above. He should change the skill.

"—Uooh!"

In that moment, Eugeo moved while letting out a rare yell. Turning over his right wrist, he received Humbert's sword with the right side of the blade. Slant was interrupted in that instant with the opponent's Lightning Flash Slash approaching his shoulder while surging with a blue-black light.

Eugeo did not go against that force, guiding his wooden sword to rest atop his shoulder. Without a moment's delay, he activated the Aincrad-style secret move, «Vertical»—

Humbert's sword touched the right sleeve of his training clothes and tore off several cen of the indigo blue fabric.

But then, Eugeo's sword fiercely forced his opponent's sword back while covered in a vivid blue light.

"Nuah!"

Humbert stared wide at the unexpected counterattack. Both Humbert and his partner were aware of the «consecutive hit skills» unique to the Aincrad-style, but linking one secret move to another certainly was beyond their expectations. Even Eugeo had no idea it was possible. He simply let his body move itself in the midst of battle.

Humbert's wooden sword was instantly pushed back over five cen and the light from Lightning Flash Slash quickly vanished. His posture was also very much broken, with both his feet leaving the floorboards.

However, that may have been for the best— His left shoulder would have been hit by Eugeo's sword had he stood firm; the force from the secret move, Vertical, rendered his entire body aloft, blowing him over three mel behind.

If he fell onto the floor like that, the bout would be irrefutably Eugeo's victory, but he obstinately refused to fall down as expected of him and he took tottering steps. He bent his body as much as he could, preserving an insecure balance.



I'll definitely get the win here if I give chase, Eugeo thought, but before he could regain his mobility from the posture of having swung his sword straight down, a loud voice rang through the practice arena.

"That's enough. This duel shall be a draw."

The owner of those pompous words was of course, Raio Antinous, with his red lips formed into a faint smile. Having finally regained his stance, Humbert shouted while looking unsatisfied.

"Ra-Raios-dono! For me to draw with this barbari- no, this rural swordsman is...!"

"Humbert."

The head swordsman-in-training merely called his name out calmly, but the second-ranked quickly lowered his head. Switching the sword to his left hand and pressing it against his waist, he sloppily knocked his right fist against his chest in an gesture to show gratitude as a knight and turned his back against Eugeo without waiting for him to return the expression.

With Humbert accompanying behind him on the left, Raio smiled as he took a glance at Eugeo and brought his hands together in mock-applause as he spoke.

"I have greatly enjoyed that curious trick of yours, Swordsman-in-training, Sir Eugeo. What are your opinions on gaining employment in the Imperial Acrobatics Troupe after graduation?"

"...I am very much in your debt for the concern you have granted me, Swordsman-in-training Antinous."

He tried omitting the «Head» and «-dono» as a rebuff at the very least, but Raio showed no indication of minding it and returned a composed nod before he started on the walk towards the entryway. Humbert who followed after him glared at Eugeo with the corners of his eyes lifted as high as he could manage.

With his soft leather shoes used for practice squeaking as he walked, Raio stopped when he passed by Eugeo who was still standing in the middle of the practice arena and murmured in a deep voice.

"I'll show you the true power of a noble next time."

"...I don't mind it even now, though."

He was frankly totally exhausted after four hundred practice swings and the unexpected duel, but Eugeo still replied so, half through stubbornness. However, Raio gave a snickering grin before starting on his way once again and spoke in an even more faint voice.

"Merely swinging swords around isn't much of a fight, peon without a surname."

Behind the head swordsman-in-training, who left a hoarse snicker, followed Humbert with a menacing expression. But he passed by without saying a word and the sound of the door opening and shutting soon echoed from behind.

In the midst of the silence that finally arrived, Eugeo let out a deep breath of air and brooded.

Strength originating from the «pride of the nobles». That, which he had experienced sword-to-sword for the first time, possessed a pressure beyond his expectations. If he had continued on with that Slant, he would have likely been forced back and gotten his right shoulder broken. As his sword had taught him, there were disadvantages in parrying a sword slashing downwards from below, but that wasn't all there was to it. Humbert's nature of showing contempt and looking down on Eugeo as a lower class person constrained his sword and body like a curse.

He was saved by the flexibility of the Aincrad-style for being able to send out secret moves from various stances this time, but in the duels during the official matches that will continue for another year, he could not rely solely on surprise attacks. There would likely be situations where he would have to overpower the other party from the front with strength.

Until then, Eugeo would definitely have to find it. «Something to put in his sword» that could oppose Humbert's and Raio's bottomless pride.

While raising the wooden sword still held in his right hand and gently stroking the abused blade with his left, Eugeo muttered.

"...Thank you. Please help me out next time too."

Slotting the sword into the belt on his waist, the short chime of a bell announced the arrival of six-thirty just as he started walking. It was finally about time for Kirito, cramming seriously in his room, to get hungry. Crossing the plain white wooden floor in haste, Eugeo gave a bow to the empty practice arena when he reached the door and rushed towards the exclusive dining hall.

Going through the short passage, he entered the elite swordsmen-in-training's dormitory. There were no residential rooms on the first floor and in their stead, a large bath, dining hall and lounge were lined up.

Mealtimes in the novice trainees' dormitory were fixed and the daily menu already decided, but quite some flexibility was given to both in the swordsmen-in-training's dormitory. It opened from six to eight and one could get the somewhat old male cook there who worked full-time to serve up any dish desired among a variety of menus that changed daily. Not to mention one could either eat at the dining hall or bring it back to their rooms.

Raios and Humbert had luckily made their way to the bath first and there were no signs of other swordsmen-in-training in the dining hall. As he approached the kitchen's counter, he checked the menus for the day posted on the bulletin board. It appears that roast mutton, deep-fried white-fleshed fish or chicken meatball stew could be chosen for the main dish.

...Let's see, if it's him, he'll get the stew, along with fresh vegetables in cheese and pickled oli, but I'm not too sure if he wants chilled siral water for drinks.

He quickly thought that and while feeling a little dejected that he had already become familiar with his partner's tastes in food before he knew it, Eugeo leaned over the counter and shouted.

"Good evening! Take-out for two please, erm, as for the main dish..."

Part 2

He braced himself for any sort of harassment that might come, but after even several days had passed from that sudden duel, he still hadn't heard a single thing out of Raios and company.

Humbert merely gave him hateful glares when passing him by in the swordsmen-in-training's dormitory or the central school building, without even a single word of resentment. He did tell Kirito about the practice arena incident just in case and warned him to watch out, but it seems that absolutely nothing happened on his side either.

"It feels kind of weird... I didn't think they would be the type to stay quiet from merely receiving a draw in a duel. Raios also said something that sounded like a threat as well..."

Leaning against the old cloth couch, Eugeo tilted his head to the side and Kirito, sitting on the opposite side, started to speak while raising a ceramic cup.

"I don't believe there's any chance of them changing their characters either. But thinking about it, it's pretty hard to do something nasty in this swordsmen-in-training dorm."

He held the kohiru tea without milk to his mouth and contentedly drank it down.

It was 9:30 P.M., with the tempestuous past week over and the break finally just a day away. They would be in dreamless slumber in their respective rooms at this time on weekdays, having settled their daily practice, meals and baths, but this particular night every week was reserved for them to chat about various matters in the shared living room while drinking tea.

Eugeo picked up his own cup and took a lick of some of the boiling pitch-black liquid, his face involuntarily turning into a frown. His partner was fond of this powdered tea only available from the south empire and would definitely make it when in charge of the tea, but Eugeo felt it to be too bitter by itself. He poured in plenty of milk from the small pot and stirred it with a teaspoon while prompting a return to the topic with his sight before Kirito raised an unexpected question.

"That's right... just for example, what kind of pranks did you play while schooling during your childhood in Rulid?"

After drinking a mouthful of the kohiru tea that lost its bitterness, leaving behind only a curious aroma, Eugeo loosened the tension in his shoulders and replied.

"I'm mainly the one those pranks were played on, though. Look, you remember, don't you, Kirito, that guard captain called Jink who challenged me to a duel during the festivities before the journey. He harassed me quite a bit... Hiding my shoes somewhere, putting those annoying bugs in my meal bag or jeering when I was together with Alice."

"Hahaha, guess kids fool around the same whichever world it is. ...But he didn't start beating you up or anything. Right?"

"Of course."

Eugeo answered with his eyes opened wide.

"There's no way he could do that. After all..."

"—It's strictly forbidden by the Taboo Index. «Unless another clause applies, you shall not intentionally reduce the Life of another person». ...But hold on, there's no problem with hiding your shoes? Theft is a major taboo too, right?"

"Theft is to make someone else's belongings into yours without permission. The sacred words in the «Stacia Window» that prove who the owner is will only transfer the ownership twenty-four hours after

the item is kept on hand or left at home. That's why even if it was an item transferred with mutual consent, it can be returned anytime within one day and for those taken without consent, the proof of ownership won't disappear if left somewhere other than a home, so it won't be theft... —You didn't actually manage to forget a law as basic as this, did you?"

Eugeo stared intently at the face of Kirito who was a «Lost Child of Vector» and his partner laughed embarrassedly while messing up his black hair.

"Th-That's right, that's how it was. Of course I didn't forget about it, obviously... wait, huh? Then what about that? Wouldn't that mean Bercouli violated the law when he tried to steal the Blue Rose Sword from the white dragon's nest in that old story?"

"Hey now, the dragon's not a human."

"I-I see..."

"Returning to the topic, pranks that involve hiding items aren't violations, but those left in the outdoors that don't belong to any particular person will begin to lose their Life after a while, so if it's not returned by then, it would become «damage to another's belongings». Thanks to that, my shoes were returned by evening, no matter how late it was, though... but why is this related to how Raios and company started behaving?"

After Eugeo leaned his head to the side, Kirito blinked his eyes as though he had completely forgotten he was the one who had brought up the topic, and spoke.

"Th-That's right. Erm, this academy has a ridiculously long list of rules in addition to the Taboo Index, you see. And within them, there's even a clause stating «You shall not enter the personal rooms of other students or staff without permission». In other words, Raios and Humbert can't enter this room and all of our belongings are safely kept in the room. Though it's a different story if we were to leave something important in a public place without proper caution..."

He paused there for a moment for some unknown reason, but Kirito soon continued the explanation.

"...And of course, we haven't done that. Hence, Raios and his buddy can't do anything with our property in the first place, like how Jink-kun bullied that helpless kid, Eugeo, in Rulid Village."

"You didn't need that helpless bit. Hmm... I see. I didn't even think about it until now, but it's true that there's no way to do anything more than insulting someone else in this swordsmen-in-training's dormitory, huh."

"And those insults become an act of disrespect that warrants the «Punishment Authority» if they cross a certain line."

Adding that on, Kirito grinned.

The Punishment Authority refers to an authority granted only to the elite swordsmen-in-training through one of the academy regulations that allows them to practically act in the place of instructors. In cases of acts of disrespect or foolhardiness that borders on breaching the rules or cannot be turned a blind eye to, swordsmen-in-training are able to use their own judgement to give a fitting punishment according to the severity of the act. The case where Kirito, who pointing it out himself, had made a large stain of dirt on the uniform of the previous head swordsman-in-training, Uolo Levanteinn, was ordered to participate in a first strike duel as punishment and was still fresh in his mind.

The Punishment Authority for swordsmen-in-training was basically for guiding novice and advanced trainees, but there was no word of it being restricted to trainees in the academy regulations. In other words, a swordsman-in-training imposing a punishment on another was theoretically possible and that

was the reason why the contempt and insults from Raio and Humbert had somewhat cooled down compared to the previous year.

Kirito had emptied his cup, so Eugeo poured in another serving and his partner dribbled in a little milk before gently stirring it. It looked like he would still be wondering for a bit while skillfully spinning the silver teaspoon in his fingers, but he nodded once and spoke before long.

"If they can't mess with our stuff, they can only go after us. In that case, the quick and easy way would be to challenge us to a first strike match and land a hit, but they've already tried that on you, Eugeo, and ended with a draw. Other than that, oh right, if I think about it... they could only bribe me with money to distance myself from Eugeo, I guess."

"Eh..."

Eugeo, who automatically let out that forlorn voice, was flustered and closed his mouth, but Kirito grinned and spoke pompously.

"Don't you worry, kid. Big brother here won't just toss you aside."

"I-I wasn't worrying about that! ...But putting money aside, what if they were to stack up those special meat buns from Gottlo's store?"

"That might do the trick."

After nodding with a deadpan expression at what Eugeo pointed out, he cheerfully laughed out loud.

"Well, jokes aside, I don't think there's much cause for worry for anything aside from them messing with our property or us directly."

But then, Kirito's expression tensed up and continued with a sober voice.

"But if you were to turn that around, it wouldn't be strange for them to come up with anything as long as it doesn't touch on the Taboo Index or academy regulations. They likely don't have the slightest intention to surrender their positions as the head and second-ranked, after all... Eugeo, do try to think of anything we might have missed."

"Yeah, I got it. There isn't even a month until the first official match. Let's both take care so that we can fight them in our best conditions."

"Yeah. ...That said, it might just be a plan to make us worry by threatening us, huh. Let's not forget our composure and *stay cool*^[2]."



At those strange words Kirito spoke as he emptied his cup, Eugeo blinked in surprise.

"What did you say? S... st...?"

Upon asking in return, his partner let his eyes wander for some reason before clearing his throat with a cough and spoke.

"That was, well, the first of the essential points of the Aincrad-style. It means something like, let's stay calm and go on. It can be used for farewells too though... then I'll see you again; something like that."

"Heh. Got it, I'll remember it. *St... stay cool.*"

Those words that he figured were in the Sacred Tongue just like the secret moves were of course, new to his ears, but they felt unusually familiar when he said them out loud. Upon repeating them numerous times in a whisper, Kirito clapped his hands together with an embarrassed expression for some reason.

"Now then, the ten o'clock bell will be ringing soon, so let's call it a night. Also, regarding tomorrow, Eugeo-kun, there's a trifling matter I'll have to attend to..."

"No way, Kirito. There's no way I'll let you escape, this time especially."

While tidying up the tea utensils, he gave his partner a fleeting scowl.

There were plans on the rest day tomorrow to go on an outing—that said, the location was the forest within the academy premises, though—which included a bonding session together with the valet trainees, Tiezé and Ronye. Having predicted that Kirito would come up with some sort of reason to escape from his behavior when he was invited, Eugeo told him with a sigh.

"Look here, a month has already passed since we became Tiezé's and Ronye's mentors. You were treated kindly by Sortiliena-senpai who you served as a valet last year too, right?"

"Outside of sword practice time, that is. ...That brings me back, I wonder if she's doing well..."

"Don't you look away. I'm saying that it's your turn to be a good senior now. Understand this, those two will be coming at nine in the morning tomorrow, so get prepared before then!"

When Eugeo pointed his index finger straight at him, Kirito replied with a dragged out "Yes" and got up from the couch. The two carried the tea utensils to the sink installed at the end of the living room and Kirito washed them with Eugeo wiping them immediately after. He had drawn well water in Rulid and Zakkaria to use, but here a metal pipe that supplied clean water just by twisting the stopper was present in most of the buildings in Centoria. He thought it was a sacred instrument for sure, like the «Bell of Time Telling», the first time he saw it, but it was actually pressurized using aerial elemental sacred arts on the multiple gigantic water wells in each district, pushing the water through countless pipes.

As a result, the water flowing out from the tap was always fresh, with no need to be concerned over deterioration in Life, like for drawn water. How glad the kids who were made to draw the water each morning would be if Rulid had this arrangement as well—finishing the washing while thinking of such things, he lined up the variety of the now-clean cups on the shelf.

Gulping down the water directly from the tap in the end, Kirito wiped his mouth before letting out a big yawn.

"Well then, please wake me up at eight o'clock tomorrow. Good night, Eugeo."

"Eight o'clock is too late, make it seven-thirty! Good night, Kirito."

Exchanging parting phrases, he added on what suddenly came to mind.

"...*Stay cool.*"

Upon doing so, his partner who was heading towards his own room looked over his shoulder and spoke with a wry smile.

"It may be used for farewells, but that's not something you would use before sleeping every night, really. Use it only if you really consider it to be a parting."

"Hmm, complicated, isn't it. Understood... then, see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

Lightly waving his right hand, Kirito sank into the room on the north side, before Eugeo switched the lamp off and opened the door on the opposite side.

The bedroom as spacious as nearly half of those rooms that accommodated ten in the novice trainees' dormitory was neatly cleaned by his valet, Tiezé, so there wasn't even a speck of dirt. Changing his home wear into long white pyjamas, he plopped himself onto the soft bed.

Along with the drowsiness that crept up on him all at once, somehow, he could faintly hear merely a single part of the conversation from earlier in his ears.

—But if you were to turn that around, it wouldn't be strange for them to come up with anything as long as it doesn't touch the Taboo Index or academy regulations.

Those was the words Kirito said in caution of Raios and Humbert. He nodded back then, but still, it was a way of thinking difficult for Eugeo to comprehend all of a sudden.

In the process of getting here from the time he was a child, there were a considerable number of times when Eugeo searched for loopholes as well, whether in the Rulid Village's laws, the Zakkaria Guard Squadron's rules or the Sword Mastery Academy's regulations. However, the times he thought of challenging the most eminent law in the Human World, the Taboo Index, was zero—no, once only.

That one time was eight years ago, when the integrity knight from the Axiom Church had arrived in the village to take Alice away. Eugeo thought about hitting the Knight with the Dragon Bone Axe held in his two hands to save Alice, but in actual fact, he hadn't take a single step. Even now, if he recalls that instant, there would be a throbbing deep in his right eye for some reason.

Of course, he didn't have even a fragment of defiance towards the integrity knights or Church now. That Knight took Alice away according to the law, so he would gain the right to pass the Church's doors through proper means and reunite with Alice. It was for that reason that Eugeo had left the village and overcome many hardships to become an elite swordsman-in-training at the academy.

However, as Kirito had said, if Raios and Humbert were thinking that "anything would be fine if it doesn't touch the Taboo Index"... in the end, were they unwillingly abiding by the absolute law that was established at the beginning of the world according to the Axiom Church? Do they feel the Taboo Index to be a hindrance in their minds...?

Even if it was Raios and his partner, that shouldn't happen. Even doubting the Taboo Index was unforgivable, it was the conclusive truth that even the emperor should respect, it was the supreme law.

Eugeo looked up at the ceiling dyed blue by the pale moonlight while lightly biting his lips. If that thought was allowed, what was he protecting and why was he protecting it; looking on without moving even a single step when the integrity knight took Alice away that day, doing nothing but chopping the Gigas Cedar for over six years after that according to the law.

The core of his right eye slightly throbbed with a prickling sensation. Eugeo forced his eyelids down, cast his disorganized thoughts away and his body sank into the depths of an indistinct slumber.

A high iron fence surrounded the Sword Mastery Academy grounds and a dense forest made up close to thirty percent of it. The stretch of old trees, with moss of a golden tint growing on them, and the sunlight that filtered through the swaying trees, dappled the green undergrowth, reminding him of the forest back home, but as Central Centoria was far south of Rulid, there was quite an abundance of small animals living there. Some that he had never set his sights on in the northern region, such as exceedingly small foxes or long and slender snakes in a shade of turquoise, basked in the sun everywhere and caught his eye despite it being over a year since he had come.

"Eugeo-senpai, are you listening?"

Hearing that voice from the side all of a sudden, Eugeo turned back in a fluster.

"Sorry, sorry, I'm listening. ...So, what was it?"

"You weren't listening, were you!"

The girl who shook her hair, its color that of ripe apples, while protesting was the one who served as Eugeo's valet trainee, Tiezé Shtolienen. Avoiding her eyes which were in a shade much like that of her hair, he tried to think up of an excuse.

"We-Well, the forest was so beautiful that I just... There are rare animals around too..."

"Rare?"

Tiezé followed Eugeo's sight and shrugged her shoulders in disinterest.

"Eeh, it's just a kintobi fox, isn't it? There are plenty of those even on the trees growing around the districts."

"Heh... That reminds me, you were born in the central, huh, Tiezé. Is your home nearby?"

"My home is in the 8th district, so it's a little far from the 5th district that the academy is in."

"I see... nn, eh?"

Eugeo turned to look again at Tiezé who was walking by his side. Even the novice trainee uniform that he wore and thought was a little tasteless last year looked strangely refined when worn by a girl. That was only to be expected; if Tiezé wasn't a student of the same academy, she wouldn't be someone Eugeo could even hope to talk to, as the son of peasants.

"Well, Tiezé, you were born as a noble, right? I thought that I heard that the residences for noble families were gathered in the 3rd and 4th districts, though..."

When he asked somewhat humbly, Tiezé's head drooped as though she was embarrassed and gave a small nod before shaking her head countless times.

"Father is a sixth class aristocrat at the very least... but being in the lower ranks of nobility is good too. Living in the residence streets close to the Imperial Administration is only for fourth class noble families and above and there's various limits to the rights held by the fifth and sixth classes. That father of mine has a habit of saying, 'It's way more relaxing being a commoner, being able to speak as they like without fearing the upper class nobles with the authority to judge'... ah, I-I apologize, I just..."

Apparently thinking that she spoke of an impolite matter to Eugeo, who was of commoner parentage, Tiezé bowed deeply while walking.

"Don't worry about it. Rather than that... what about that authority to judge, don't all of the nobles have it?"

While recalling the text of the Empire Fundamental Law he had studied the previous year, Eugeo asked and immediately got a loud "Absolutely not!" in return.

"The authority to judge is granted only to the fourth class and above, with the aristocrats who are fifth class and below on the other hand becoming the subject of those judgements from the upper class. My father works as a secretary in the Administration, but it seems there are many among the fifth and sixth class aristocrats laboring at the Imperial Castle or public offices who get sentenced for offending the upper class nobles. ...That said, those are matters between adults, so it seems to be mostly not physical punishment, but reduction of wages and such, though."

"I-I see... It must be problematic there as well, huh, in the world of nobles..."

Taking glances at Eugeo who had his eyes wide open, the red-haired novice trainee spoke rapidly with a slight blush on her cheeks for some reason.

"Li-Like I said... someone like me, the daughter of a sixth class aristocrat, is only nobility in name; our lifestyles aren't much different from all of the commoners."

"H-Hmm..."

While letting out a vague reply that neither agreed nor disagreed, Eugeo pondered on the empire's structure once more.

The «Empire Fundamental Law» spread by the Imperial Administration established the social system of the Norlangarth North Empire. That said, as every crime and their respective punishments were covered by the law superior to it, the Taboo Index, the Empire Fundamental Law was largely made up of conventions concerning the masses' class system. To put it in other words, the rights of the nobles and the rights of the commoners.

During the period he was a novice trainee, there was once when the elderly teacher in charge of teaching Law (the only other classes were «Sacred Arts» and «History» though) was asked a question by a certain black-haired male student. Teacher, why are there nobles and commoners in the Empire, he asked.

The teacher who was a lower class noble was at a loss for words for a moment, before answering in a stern tone.

—According to the prophecies heralded by the Axiom Church since ancient times, the army of darkness will invade in force from the four paths through the mountain range at the edge... «North Cave», «West Gorge», «South Corridor» and «East Gate» someday. To eradicate those vile demi-humans, all of those who hold the sacred tasks of being imperial knights or imperial guards from the four empires will have to battle as the «Human World Army». To stand at the head of the Human World Army as its commanders when that time comes, nobles are to polish their swordsmanship, study the arts and temper their mind and body.

Hearing that, Eugeo honestly felt admiration, despite sensing an unfathomable feeling.

Two years ago, together with Kirito, Eugeo had fought a group of goblins that had invaded from the land of darkness at the «North Cave» that the elderly teacher mentioned. Unfortunately, he had fallen unconscious from an attack from the goblin chief midway through the battle, but the demi-humans' horrifying appearances and feral, coarse voices were still vivid in his memories. After a discussion with Kirito, they decided not to speak a single word about the fight at the academy, but if the tale were to be told in detail, it would probably make half of the female students faint.

Of course, even Eugeo didn't want to experience that another time. Thus, he was genuinely impressed by the nobles who would be battling those scary goblins, as well as the orcs and ogres who were said to be even more bulky and ferocious than them, at the front lines.

But on the other hand. Over three hundred and eighty years have already passed since the God of Creation Stacia gave life to the Human World. In that time, the army of darkness had never successfully invaded in great numbers even once. In other words, the four empires, especially those from the upper class of nobility, have been exempted from the daily manual labor, living in spacious estates and exercising the authority to judge over the lower class nobles, all in preparation for an enemy they have never actually seen for themselves—without even knowing when they would come...

As though she could see what was in Eugeo's heart, Tiezé gave a light sigh while walking at his side and spoke.

"...Hence, my father wanted his eldest child to be conferred fourth class nobility, which would grant an immunity against judgement at the very least, before succeeding the family; that was why I was enrolled in the academy. If I were to be chosen as the representative for the academy and get a good placing in the Empire Swordsmanship Tournament, it wouldn't be an impossible goal... Well, for me who got eleventh on the entrance examinations' scores, it's probably a pipe dream no matter how hard I try, though."

Eugeo felt the young girl who stuck her tongue out for a short instant and smiled to be shining too radiantly and slightly narrowed his eyes.

Compared to himself, who had entered the academy for the personal reason of reuniting with his childhood friend who was taken away to the Church in the past, he thought Tiezé's stance of learning swordsmanship for the sake of improving her family's honor to be the proper self-esteem of the nobles.

"No... Tiezé, you're great. To please your father, you have worked so hard and got into the top twelve as a new student."

The moment Eugeo voiced that out seriously, a shrill reply immediately followed.

"No-Not at all! ...I merely got lucky because the theme for performance arts was a style I was strong at. I'm only at this standard after learning the sword from my father since three years old, so you're much more amazing, Eugeo-senpai. Despite how tough it was to gain a recommendation from a guard squadron, you easily achieved it and even became the fifth place among the elite swordsmen-in-training. I really believe it is an honor to be chosen to serve you as your valet, Eugeo-senpai."

"N-No, that's..."

Eugeo noticed his gesture of bending down his head and ruffling his bangs with his right hand was exactly the same as Kirito, who should have been following behind, and lowered his hand down in a hurry.

Tiezé said it was "an honor", but in truth, the only reason why the girl had become Eugeo's valet and Ronye became Kirito's, was to put it nicely, at the guidance of the God, Stacia, or to put it plainly, a coincidence.

Valets were selected using a system where the twelve students who became the new elite swordsmen-in-training singled one out, their turns based on their ranks, among the top twelve new students. In other words, this year, first would be the head, Raios, choosing one person, then the second-ranked Humbert choosing another, while Eugeo and Kirito should be the fifth and sixth to

choose. However, after discussing it over with his partner as well, the two decided to shift their turns to the last. To make the new students not picked by the other ten their valets.

As a result, the two wooden tags granted to Eugeo and Kirito had Tiezé's and Ronye's names. They were a little lost for words when they found out both were female students—Kirito actually even had a complicated expression on—but still, Eugeo thought it was a good thing. After all, the unfair reasoning why the other ten did not choose Tiezé and Ronye was because the girls were the only ones born into sixth class noble families among the twelve.

Tiezé and Ronye obviously did not know the facts behind the selection meeting and there was no need to inform them. Eugeo thought it fortunate that they became their valets and Kirito was definitely... probably the same.

As such, after he coughed once, Eugeo shifted the topic to his own experiences.

"...The entrance examinations weren't anywhere near relaxing even in my case; rather I was really nervous. I only managed to pass and become a swordsman-in-training this year like this, half thanks to Kirito for teaching me various things..."

Upon saying so, Tiezé opened her eyes wide, their color that of the leaves dyed in the red of autumn, and shouted.

"Eeh!? Then Kirito-senpai is actually stronger than Eugeo-senpai?"

".....It hurts agreeing if you were to ask it like that..."

While Tiezé laughed out cheerfully, he took a glance behind. He was only anxious over whether his partner had been treating his valet well, but he could hear bits and pieces of Kirito's words said in a tone that was surprisingly smooth.

"...And so, I believe there's only two ways that you have to be prepared, against a slash from the upper-level posture in the High Norkia-style before it happens. Either from straight above or diagonally from the top-right... any other direction will need another step, so you have the time to take it even after seeing it. As for how to tell whether it's from straight above or the top-right..."

—Well, putting the content aside, Ronye appeared to be listening with enthusiasm as well.

Turning back to the front with a wry smile, a thought suddenly came to Eugeo.

Eugeo's aim for studying the sword was to meet Alice again, while Tiezé and Ronye probably did it to raise their family's honor. And Kirito had said that his aim was the same as Eugeo whenever he was asked.

Of course, he had no intention of doubting his friendship, but there was a hunch he had at times. That Kirito did not go through sword practice for the sake of attaining something, but that his aim might just be to master the way of the sword itself. That certainly seemed to be the close link between the person, Kirito, and the type of swordsmanship, Aincrad-style. He could practically believe the two to be the same existence.

Up until now, Eugeo had only given proper thought to Raio and Humbert as his opponents for the official matches conducted in the coming month. However, thinking about it, depending on how the matches go, it would be perfectly possible for it to be not those two, but his partner and mentor as well, Kirito.

Of course, he had no faith in winning. But before that, he couldn't even imagine a situation where he would have to cross swords with Kirito seriously. Just what sort of resolution would he require to hold his sword and use his skills...

"Ah, won't the edge of that pond do?"

Tiezé suddenly extended her right hand straight in front, dragging Eugeo out from his musing. Following towards where the slender white finger pointed towards, he saw the bank of a beautiful pond, with a dense, short undergrowth growing on it; it certainly was perfect to spread out a bento on.

"Yeah, that place looks good. —Hey, Kirito, Ronye! Let's have lunch at the side of that pond!"

When Eugeo turned back and yelled, the usual nonchalant smile appeared on his closest friend who lightly raised his hand.

Spreading the large sheet they had brought along atop the grass, the four sat down in a circle.

"Aah... I'm hungry..."

Kirito made the exaggerated gesture of pressing down around his stomach and the two girls giggled while opening the rattan baskets they had brought along, quickly starting to arrange the food.

"Erm, we were the ones who made it, so whether it's to your taste or not..."

Nearly none of her usual tension could be felt from novice trainee Ronye Arabel when she added that on embarrassingly while lining up the plates. If the girl were to understand that the completely black-clad elite swordsman-in-training wasn't as sullen as he looked through this outing today, it definitely wouldn't be long until she got used to her mentor.

A luxurious menu was packed into the impressive rattan baskets, including slices of meat and fish as well as cheese between white bread, fried chicken coated with spices and a cake filled with plenty of dried fruits and berries.

Tiezé checked the Life of all the dishes while Ronye said the before-meal prayers and everyone recited the scripture, "Avi Admina"—with Kirito being the first one to reach out for the food immediately following that. Tossing a large piece of fried meat into his mouth, he chewed for a moment with his eyes closed before speaking with the mannerisms of a lecturer.

"Certainly, it's delicious. The flavor is not at all inferior to the food from The Deer Leap, Ronye-kun, Tiezé-kun."

"Wah, really?!"

The two girls shouted with their faces gleaming, exchanging glances and laughing cheerfully. Eugeo fearlessly reached out as well and bit into smoked fish and herbs between thin slices of bread.

Unlike the bento that Alice would deliver to him daily, long ago when he was swinging the axe alone in the woods, the bread had the taste of the city with plenty of white butter spread onto it. He wasn't used to the dainty high class cuisine when he had just arrived at central, but he could honestly consider it delicious now. While pondering on whether that meant he was getting used to it, Eugeo nodded at Tiezé as well.

"Yeah, it's really good. But wasn't it hard to gather this many ingredients?"

"Ah... well, actually..."

Tiezé turned towards her once again and Ronye answered humbly.

"As you may know, novice trainees are not to leave except on rest days, so we asked Kirito-senpai and he helped us buy them at the central bazaar after school yesterday. Eugeo-senpai was away at the library, so..."

"Eh, I... I see, so that's what happened."

Dumbfounded, he gazed at Kirito who was devoting his entire time to devouring the food.

"I would have gone with you to buy them if you had asked... No, firstly, if you're already getting along that well, then there's no reason for you to run away now! What was all that trouble for..."

His strength dwindling while getting just a little angry, Eugeo snatched the biggest slice of fruit cake and chomped down on it.

"Aah, and I had my eye on that one too... Well, what can I say, I thought I was the one being overly concerned for your sake, Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono."

"There wasn't any need for you to be, geez..."

After glaring at Kirito who was grinning from ear to ear, he turned towards Ronye and Tiezé who were blinking in surprise and spoke in an unintended grumble.

"This guy here has always been like this from long ago. It was the same back before we got in the Zakkaria Guard Squadron and on the journey to Centoria; he's treated all suspicious and scary at first, but before I knew it, the wife and kids at the farm or inn would grow fond of him and started giving him snacks. It's best for you to watch out and not end up that way, Ronye."

However, it looked like it was too late as the dark brown-haired novice trainee shook her head with a slight blush on her cheeks.

"No, ending up that way, you say... Kirito-senpai looked scary, but I found out he was a kind person straight away, so..."

"Ah, of course, you too, Eugeo-senpai."

Returning a smile devoid of energy to Tiezé who added that on, Eugeo munched on another mouthful of cake.

Even while doing so, he continued to stare at the partner of his at his side who was calmly gobbling down the food, wondering if there was any way to drop that guy down a peg— That was when Tiezé and Ronye suddenly sat up straight and opened their mouths to speak in a solemn manner.

"Erm... Eugeo-senpai, Kirito-senpai. Actually, there's a request that we would like to ask from the two of you."

"Y-Yes? ...What is it?"

When Eugeo inclined his head to the side, Tiezé shook her red hair and bowed deeply.

"We're very sorry to ask this of you, but well... it's about the request for a change in mentor you mentioned the other day, Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono; we would like you to speak with the academy's management on our behalf..."

"Wh-What was that?"

Lost for words once again, he tried to recall if he had really said those words and finally remembered. It was true, he did seem to faintly recall telling Ronye, "I think it's fine if you want me to talk to the teacher for you and get your mentor changed", when Kirito kept her waiting several days ago.

So, would that make this luxurious meal a farewell gift? Eugeo tried to confirm this just in case while assailed by dismay.

"Let's see... does that mean you want to quit being my valet...? Or Kirito's... or maybe even both...?"

Upon saying so, Ronye and Tiezé lifted their lowered faces, showed a dazed expression for an instant and started shaking their heads from side to side frantically at the same time. Tiezé who was sitting on Eugeo's left was the first to start speaking and she did so in a panic.

"Th-That's not it! It's not about us, that's simply unthinkable. On the contrary, there are many who want to switch to serve as valets for the two of you... no, that's not what I was getting at, the one who wished for a change was another girl from our room in the dormitory. Her name is Frenica and she's a very nice girl who's serious, puts in her best, and is skilled with swords yet humble, but..."

Tiezé's shoulders slumped down and Ronye switched in to speak.

"...Actually, the elite swordsman-in-training who chose Frenica as a valet seems to be quite a strict person... Especially in the recent few days, she appears to have been punished for long periods of time over minor blunders and ordered to provide services that should be considered rather inappropriate within the academy, and looks ever so distressed..."

The novice trainees grasped their small hands before their chests, those red and brown eyes clouded over.

Returning the half-eaten fried meat to his plate, Eugeo alternated between looking at each of them, not completely wanting to believe it.

"B-But... even if it's an elite swordsman-in-training, ordering a valet trainee to do tasks specified by the academy to be out of scope shouldn't be possible..."

"Yes, that's... of course, she cannot be ordered to go against the school's rules, but those rules do not include every single possible act either... like various orders that do not infringe the rules and well, are somewhat challenging for a female student to bear..."

With Tiezé faltering with her face bright red, Eugeo could vaguely guess at what was ordered of the valet novice student, Frenica, from the swordsman-in-training in question.

"No, I understand the situation that girl, Frenica, is in even if you don't speak any further. I wish to provide my help as soon as possible, but if I'm not wrong..."

He continued while recalling the corresponding portion of the academy regulations he fully memorized.

"Erm... 'To ensure the maximum amount of support is given to the elite swordsman-in-training's training, a single valet is in charge of looking after the elite swordsman-in-training. The duty of being a valet is assigned to one chosen among the twelve novice trainees that topped the year in terms of grades, but with the consent of the elite swordsman-in-training and instructor-in-charge, the valet may be dismissed and another appointed from among the novice trainees'... that was it, I believe. In other words, to dismiss Frenica's appointment, not only the instructor's approval is needed, but the swordsman-in-training's as well, huh. Well, I can try persuading though... what's the name of the swordsman-in-training in question?"

Upon asking, Eugeo knitted his brows, having felt a sudden bad premonition. Tiezé hesitated for a short while before softly letting the name out from her lips as though it was difficult for her.

"Well... it's Second-ranked Elite Swordsman-in-training Humbert Zizek-dono."

The instant he heard it, Kirito who was listening without a word growled, seemingly annoyed.

"Despite how he got trounced when he was the one who brought about that match, that guy's still keeping up that nasty behavior, huh. I'll totally beat him up the next time."

"I didn't do him in or anything. —But that might possibly be the reason..."

Eugeo lightly bit on his lips before he explained the circumstances to Tiezé and Ronye.

"Actually, you see, I had a duel with Swordsman-in-training Humbert at the practice arena several days ago. The result was a draw, but Humbert didn't seem satisfied with that... So the reason behind him being tough on Frenica recently might be due to that duel..."

"Geez, bullying his own valet just because he couldn't win against Eugeo, that guy isn't anything like how a swordsman should be."

Despite Kirito spitting those words out bitterly, the two girls did not seem to have understood the situation yet. With her eyebrows raised, Tiezé murmured in uncertain tones.

"Erm... in other words, as Elite Swordsman-in-training Zizek-dono got a draw in a match with Eugeo-senpai, he wanted, err..."

She couldn't find what she wanted to say, so Ronye continued on, with just as little certainty.

"Revenge... is what it's called, isn't it..."

"Right, that's the word. As revenge for not winning, he used the Punishment Authority on Frenica and ordered those humiliating acts of her, is that how it is...?"

Even if they were nobles like Humbert and Raios, as they were born in the sixth class noble families which were closest to commoners, it must not have been easy for them to understand the unreasonable conduct of the second-ranked swordsman-in-training. Not even able to find the needed words to express it well; that was the degree of difference in their mindsets.

For Eugeo who had grown up in a pioneer village on the outskirts, he could guess at Humbert's mentality, but he had absolutely no sympathy for it. When he was a child in Rulid, the son of the chief guard, Jink, did do various mean things to him, but his motive was definitely extremely childish. Jink liked Alice, so he disliked Eugeo who was always with her and bullied him by hiding his shoes and such.

However, it seems that Humbert took the anger from not winning the match against Eugeo and hurled it all at someone completely unrelated to the affair, his own valet trainee—that Frenica who he should have been mentoring with care.

He knew the existence of the words, revenge and venting anger. Even Eugeo experienced it once when he was young, when he got jealous over the wooden sword his father bought for his elder brother as a gift and couldn't help but hit rocks countless times with his own wooden sword that was handmade by his father, ending up with it breaking. His father scolded him, saying that it was a shameful act known as venting anger and he never did it ever again.

Just like breaking your own wooden sword, it was likely that being excessively strict on your own valet trainee was not against the Taboo Index, Empire Fundamental Law, or even the Sword Mastery Academy's regulations. However—even if that was true, did that mean «it was fine» to do it? In this world, aside from laws that were tangibly recorded down, shouldn't there be something important that one must follow...?

At that moment, Tiezé, who seemed to have been tossing around the same doubts with her head lowered, muttered as though she was forcing the words out from her throat.

"I... I do not understand."

Raising her face to stare straight at Eugeo, the girl who was the successor to a sixth class noble family stiffened her cheeks that still held traces of adolescence as she continued.

"...My father had always said this. We... the Shtolienen family are nobles, thanks to nothing more than our ancestors long ago gaining recognition from the emperor back then for a few meager military efforts. Hence, we must not take for granted, that we live in a larger house than commoners and are bestowed several privileges. The fact that we are nobles means that we should exert all efforts to ensure that those who aren't are able to live on in happiness and peace, and when the time for war comes about, we must draw our blades before those who aren't nobles and succumb to death before they do, he said..."

Then, Tiezé momentarily shut her mouth and turned her autumn-tinted eyes towards the south—towards the heart of Centoria. She stared at the solemn form of the Imperial Administration that slightly peeked through above the treetops for a while before returning her glance to Eugeo and the rest.

"...Speaking of the Zizek family, they are an illustrious family who constructed a huge mansion in the fourth district and even own land in the outskirts of Centoria. So shouldn't Elite Swordsman-in-training Humbert-dono be striving much, much harder than the lower class nobles for the masses' happiness? Even if it wasn't noted down in the Taboo Index, nobles must always consider their own actions and not cause misfortune for others through them... that's what father said. Humbert-dono's actions might not be against the Taboo Index and the academy regulations... but... but still, Frenica kept crying in bed last night. How could... such a thing be forgiven...?"

Tiezé finished her long, long speech with all she had and large drops of tears surfaced on her two eyes. However, Eugeo who embraced the same doubts as the girl did not have an immediate reply for her. Ronye held out a white handkerchief and touched the area around Tiezé's eyes, and at that time—

"He's a wonderful father. I wish I could meet him."

For a short while, Eugeo could not believe a voice so calm could actually emerge from Kirito's mouth.

That black-clad swordsman, who inspired awe and fear in his fellow students with that intimidating glint in his eyes and blunt demeanor, as well as that match with the previous head swordsman-in-training, Uolo Levanteinn, that became legend, looked at Tiezé with consoling eyes and talked gently, word by word.



"What your father had taught you, is called «*Noble Obligation*»!—*Actually Noblesse Oblige would be more accurate, but as the words are supposed to be in English/Sacred Tongue a more modern interpretation is used here*» in En... no, in the Sacred Tongue, the way the spirit should be. Nobles, or in other words, those who possess power, must use it for the sake of those without it... that's right, you could say it's something to be proud of."

It was the first time Eugeo had heard that phrase despite taking a year's worth of lessons in the Sacred Tongue, but its meaning was immediately absorbed by his mind and he nodded deeply. Kirito's voice flowed on like a spring breeze.

"That pride is more important than any sort of law or regulation. Even if it's not prohibited by the law, there are still things that can't be done and inversely, there might be things that must be done even if it's prohibited by the law."

That declaration which in a certain sense, practically refuted the Taboo Index—or the Axiom Church itself, made Ronye and Tiezé swallow their breath. However, Kirito stared into the young girls and continued talking unwaveringly.

"A long, long time ago, a great man named Saint Augustinus said this. That an unjust law is no law at all. Regardless of how magnificent a law or authority may be, you mustn't blindly accept it. Even if it doesn't violate any taboos or regulations, Humbert's conduct is definitely wrong. There are no excuses for doing something like making an innocent girl cry. That's why someone has to stop him, and in this case, that would be..."

"Aah... Guess it's up to us, huh."

Eugeo nodded, but raised the doubts he still had to his partner.

"But Kirito... who will be the one to decide whether the law is just or not? If everyone bends it as they like, there wouldn't be any order, would there? Doesn't the Axiom Church exist to judge on the behalf of the masses?"

It was true that the Taboo Index did not have a say on the rights and wrongs of every single action a human could take. Hence, it ended up allowing Humbert to vent his anger on his own valet. However, much like how Sister Azariya would scold Jink for his pranks long ago, Eugeo and Kirito are able to express their opinions to Humbert, their peer. That should be a completely different matter from actually doubting the authority of the Church.

The one who had made the world was God, and the Church was God's proxy. The Church that had led the Human World well for hundreds of years couldn't have been mistaken; things progressed without him voicing those out.

The one who answered Eugeo's question was not Kirito, but Ronye, who had kept her silence until then. The clear speech spoke by the usually docile girl, with a strong light in her eyes, gave Eugeo a slight shock.

"Well... I feel like I understood a little about what Kirito-senpai said. An important spirit to have despite it not being recorded in the Taboo Index... that's basically, the sense of justice within oneself, I believe. Not merely obeying the law, but thinking about why that law exists with that justice in consideration... That thinking through it is more important than abiding by it..."

"Yep, that's it, Ronye. Being able to think is a human being's greatest ability. It's stronger than any famous sword, stronger than any secret move."

Kirito said so with a smile and within his eyes, approval and something else, some sort of deep emotion could be seen. Facing his partner that still had many mysteries surrounding him despite spending over two years sleeping and eating together, Eugeo asked one last question.

"But Kirito, the one you mentioned earlier, that Augus... something person, who exactly was he? An integrity knight of the Church?"

"Hmm, a priest, I guess. He's probably already dead, though."

With that answer, Kirito grinned broadly.

After seeing off Ronye and Tiezé, who each carried a completely emptied rattan basket and had waved with their other hands while returning to the novice trainee dormitory, Eugeo looked at his partner's face once again.

"...Kirito, have you come up with anything regarding the matter about Humbert?"

Upon saying that, Kirito made a complicated face and groaned for a while.

"Hmm... even if we tell him to stop bullying the junior students, he's certainly not the type to obediently stop... But still..."

"But still... what?"

"Putting Humbert aside, that guy's boss, Raio, is sneaky in an obnoxious way, but he's no idiot. For him to get chosen to be the head elite swordsman-in-training, he should have not only skill with the sword, but also good scores in his sacred arts, law and history as well."

"That's true, better than a certain somebody who got sixth place through physical strength alone."

"The story goes that there are two such students, actually."

They were about to unconsciously begin their usual whimsical exchange, but Eugeo realized it wasn't the time for it and took the initiative.

"And so...?"

"...Raio is in the same room as Humbert, right? So don't you find it strange that he's keeping quiet about Humbert venting his anger on his own valet trainee? Even if there isn't a formal punishment, bad rumors will spread at the least, and at that time, Raio's reputation would drop as well, sharing the same room. For a bundle of pride like him, I believe he'd hate it as much as an actual punishment..."

"But... it's a fact that Humbert is bullying Frenica. In other words, wouldn't that mean that Raio forswore Humbert's churlishness as well? If the cause was the duel with me, I would definitely need to have a word with..."

"And that's what I'm getting at."

Kirito spoke with an expression as if he had chewed down on dried nedge lezta.

"Perhaps this is an elaborate trap targeted at you, Eugeo? You object to Humbert's actions, get into some sort of argument, then as a result, end up violating the academy regulations... if it's a setup like that..."

"Eeh?"

Eugeo opened his eyes wide at the unexpected idea.

"No way... that's probably impossible. Even if our placings are different, Humbert and I are both swordsmen-in-training. As long as I don't specifically insult him verbally, no matter how he notes it down, it won't be considered as disrespect. Rather, I'm more worried about you, Kirito."

"Aah, well... guess you're right. Like getting mud on that guy's uniform or something."

Eugeo let out a short sigh at his partner who said that deadpan. Kirito had committed that exact act of disrespect the previous year, on the previous head, Uolo, and was ordered to duel with the ridiculous conditions of using real swords and first to strike wins.

"Look here, when we get to Humbert's room, I'll talk first. Kirito, you just stand at the back for a bit with an intimidating look."

"Leave it to me, that's my forte."

"...I'll be counting on you. We'll give a verbal warning today and if they don't heed it, let's appeal for Frenica's replacement to the management. Humbert should hear us out at least. Even that much should have an effect on that guy."

"Aah... guess so."

Slapping Kirito's back while he still looked unsatisfied about something, Eugeo started walking towards the elite swordsmen-in-training's dormitory constructed atop a hill. The indignation he felt when he heard Tiezé's story did not fade away easily and his pace naturally sped up.

A year ago, the person who awaited Eugeo, appointed as a valet without knowing his way around at all, atop that hill had the name Gorgolosso Baltoh; he was a great man who certainly did not look a single day under the age of twenty.

That bulky body with roughly twice the girth of Eugeo was covered in solid muscles and paired with splendid sideburns that resembled the manes of the lions that lived in the South Empire, although Eugeo had not seen them outside of art, they made him wonder if he had entered an instructor's room at first.

Gorgolosso took a fleeting glance at Eugeo frozen from the tension, and then ordered, "Take your clothes off", in a gruff voice. Eugeo was horrified, but he couldn't disobey it, so he took off his grey uniform, leaving behind a single piece of underwear. He was immersed once again, from head to toe in that intense gaze—then Gorgolosso gave a broad, toothed smile and said, "Alright, you've trained well".

Feeling relieved from the bottom of his heart while he put his clothes back on, Gorgolosso informed Eugeo that he was not a noble, but had risen up from a common guard as well, which was the reason why he had singled out Eugeo who had the same history. For the one year after that, although his vivacious behavior troubled Eugeo at times, he did not work him unreasonably hard, acquainting him with the sword with tender care. Eugeo still thought the splendid Valtio-style swordsmanship taught by Gorgolosso was just as important as Kirito's Aincrad-style in getting him through the swordsman-in-training selection test.

The day Gorgolosso graduated from the academy and left for central, Eugeo asked a question that he had hidden over that one year. About why he named him, instead of Kirito who entered the school due to a recommendation from a guard squadron as well.

While brushing his disheveled sideburns, Gorgolosso answered.

—True, I did realize that guy's ability with the sword was higher than yours when I saw the performance arts during the entrance exam. But you see, that's the exact reason why I chose you. I

figured you would be the type to struggle to the death while glaring at the top, just like me. ...Well, one way or another, that second-ranked Liena had already chosen Kirito by then, though.

Gahahaha, while he lively laughed, Gorgolosso rubbed Eugeo's head with his massive hand and spoke. That he definitely had to become a swordsman-in-training, and then treasure his own valet trainee. Eugeo nodded without end while holding back his tears and sent Gorgolosso off at the school gate until his huge frame disappeared from sight.

That man taught him that elite swordsmen-in-training and their valet trainees do not merely have the relationship of a mentor and a caretaker. Eugeo thought that he probably wouldn't become as much of a mentor as Gorgolosso had been. But still, he intended to try his best over this one year, to teach Tiezé what that man had taught him, even if it was merely a fraction of it. Right—this might be what Kirito mentioned earlier, «something more important than anything else, even though it's not recorded in the regulations».

Humbert and Raios might not understand this. As they've gotten placings below thirty with their scores in the entrance examinations, they probably went easy in the selection match due to their objections to becoming a valet. Even so, there were things that needed to be said.

Pushing open the door before him with his two hands and entering the swordsmen-in-training's dormitory, Eugeo ascended the large staircase in front with loud steps from his leather shoes.

Part 3

A short bit after knocking on the door at the eastern corner of the dormitory's third floor, Humbert could be heard asking who was there from inside.

"Swordsmen-in-training Eugeo and Kirito. We have something to discuss with Swordsman-in-training Zizek."

He stated their names while trying to maintain his calm, but rough footsteps immediately rang out and the door violently burst open. Humbert, who glared at the two in turn with a scowl, cried out with a voice that might even be loud enough to pass through the atrium in the middle of the dormitory to reach the first floor.

"How rude of you, intruding without even any prior notice! It's obvious that you should request permission for a meeting through a letter first!"

Without even giving Eugeo a chance to reply, Raio Antinous's placid voice immediately bombarded them from behind Humbert.

"Now now, aren't we all fellow comrades refining ourselves in the same institution? Let them pass, Humbert, though it is unfortunate we could not have any tea prepared for them, at this short notice."

"...Make sure you express your gratitude for Raio-dono's hospitality."

Forcing those words out through his lips, Humbert turned aside. While wondering just what sort of skit this was supposed to be, Eugeo entered the room with a bow.

"The heck was..."

Kirito who followed behind was about to have those same thoughts slip out from his mouth, so he shut himself up with a cough and walked in front of a couch set in the middle of the living room. The amount of space and arrangement was of course, the same as Eugeo and Kirito's, but the fixtures, such as the carpet spread over the floor and the pale curtains that wafted in the gentle spring breeze, were replaced with those of the highest grade.

Even the couch with its width of three meters had a silk finish with ample cotton, and Humbert sank in deeply upon sitting on its right edge. Raio could be seen sitting on the left edge, but barely sunk in, resting his head upon it and with his two legs stretching out onto the table, in an appearance as though he were sleeping.

On top of that, these heirs of upper class noble families were not wearing the academy uniform, but comfortable and thin long garments. Raio's was bright red and Humbert's was bright blue; that glossy luster was unique to high-grade silk from the south. The aroma drifting from the cups lined up on the table was probably green tea, a specialty from the east. After putting that to his mouth and slowly sipping it, Raio finally turned towards Eugeo.

"...And so, what business do you have with us in the evening of this rest day, my friend, Swordsman-in-training Eugeo?"

There was another couch before the table, but he seemed to have no intention of asking them to sit. While thinking that suited him better, Eugeo looked down at the two with as strict a face as he could muster, and spoke.

"I am here regarding a somewhat distasteful rumor about Swordsman-in-training Zizek that has reached my ears. Before disgracing the name of a friend at school, I believed it best to render some advice, though it may be presumptuous on my part."

Humbert's expression changed and was about to cry out something at that moment, but Raios held him back by moving his left hand slightly before curving his excessively crimson lips a miniscule amount into a smile.

"Really now...?"

He smoothly delivered his lines while steam rose up from the cup in his right hand.

"This is both outside and beyond my expectations. To think you could be so concerned about my friend's reputation. However, I regret to inform you that nothing comes to mind regarding that sort of rumor. Though I am ashamed of my ignorance, nothing would please me more than having you enlighten me on this issue."

"...I have heard that Zizek-dono has committed vulgar acts upon his own valet trainee. I do believe you would have some inkling of that!"

"How rude!"

Rising from the couch as well this time, Humbert declared loudly.

"How dare someone without a family name, with the air of some peasant from a remote village accuse me, the eldest son of a fourth class noble family, of vulgar acts of all things!"

"Now, don't get so riled up, Humbert."

Raios waved his left hand side to side and silenced his henchman once again.

"Even if there are differences in our birthplaces, aren't we fellow students under this roof now? You can't simply condemn everything as disrespectful, inside of this academy at least. ...That said, it would be a different story if that were merely slander utterly without basis though. Where have you heard that queer rumor from, Eugeo-dono?"

"I doubt you wish for your free time to be wasted away either, Antinous-dono, so do stop playing the fool. This is not without basis. I've heard it directly from the novice trainees who stay in the same room as Zizek-dono's valet."

"Oh? Is this how it is, then? Are you saying that Humbert's valet has formally entrusted you with a protest via the novice trainees of the same room by her own accord?"

"...No, that's not it, but..."

Eugeo involuntarily bit his lips. It was true that he wasn't here due to a personal request from Frenica, so it would be difficult to hold his ground if his claim was rejected as slander without basis.

However, as there was no way Eugeo could retreat in front of Raios grinning away in his slovenly posture and Humbert crooking his mouth in a loathsome manner, he sharply returned a question.

"...I believe the two of you are denying it in that case? That Humbert-dono is committing unbefitting acts upon that valet trainee named Frenica?"

"Fm, unbefitting? That is such an odd word to use, Eugeo-dono. How about using what is more easily understood, by saying that it violates the academy regulations?"

"....."

He ground his teeth once again. Even if those regulations applied only on academy premises, their importance was close to the same level as the Taboo Index or the Empire Fundamental Law to students and none should dare to break them.

Even Humbert wouldn't violate the academy regulations; Eugeo knew better than to consider that as well. That was the very reason he couldn't forgive them. Anything goes as long as it wasn't against the regulations, their acts were grounded in that belief even if they didn't voice it out. Taking in a deep breath of air, Eugeo continued the dispute.

"But still... but still, even if it's not forbidden by the academy regulations, are there not things that elite swordsmen-in-training must not do to the novice trainees they mentor?!"

"Oh my, now Eugeo-dono, what exactly are you implying that Humbert here has done to Frenica?"

"...Th-That's..."

As he couldn't bear to make Tiezé and Ronye explain in detail and thus, hadn't heard the specifics of those «unbefitting orders», Eugeo could not give an immediate reply. With that, Raio spread his hands out in an exaggerated motion and spoke while shaking his head left and right.

"Oh dear, even I can't bring myself to attend to you any further. ...How is it, Humbert, has any of what Eugeo-dono spoke of rang any bells to you?"

The instant Raio asked in that manner, Humbert, who was leaning forward while glowering at Eugeo until now, put the weight of his back onto the couch with a thud and cried out.

"Not at all! I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about! In the first place, there is no damned, no, there is simply no way I could have done any vulgar act on Frenica... after all, that girl has never refused even once!"

Stroking his grey hair from front to back, the second-ranked swordsman-in-training showed a venomous smile.

"Well, I did order her to aid with several trifling tasks, though. I'm sure you too, recall the match which, though I find it shameful to admit, ended as a draw, Eugeo-dono; I mended my ways after that and devoted myself to training. Perhaps due to restraining from any practice that would create those unattractive muscles up until now as well, it was inevitable that my body would ache. Hence, I had to reluctantly ask for Frenica to massage and relax my body when I got the chance to take a bath every evening. In addition, it would be troubling if her uniform were to get wet, so I had the generosity to permit her to undress herself to her underwear. I certainly have difficulties understanding just which part of this is supposed to be unbefitting, vulgar behavior!"

Gazing in a daze at Humbert, who was chuckling away through his throat, Eugeo noticed the birth of an unfamiliar emotion deep in his heart.

Was treating a human like this with courtesy, and even attempting to persuade him actually necessary?

Wouldn't a single strike on him from a wooden sword without any questions asked suit him more than words?

His right hand twitched, wanting to thrust in with a wooden sword and challenge a duel here and now, after which Eugeo noticed his waist was empty. Taking in countless deep breaths of air to compose himself, he let out a voice as restrained as he could muster.

"...Humbert-dono, do you believe that an order like that... could really be permitted? True... true, there are no corresponding clauses within the academy regulations, but that should be because there was no need to explicitly forbid it. To actually order your valet to undress, just how shameless could you..."

"Hahaha, hahahahaha!"

Suddenly, Raio, who had been silent for the past while, raised the ends of his lips and let out a wild laughter. It was as if he was waiting for those words from Eugeo; that was what it seemed like.

"Hahaha! To think those words would come from your own mouth, Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono, hahaha! After all, haven't you yourself undressed night after night, for that large male commoner when you served as a valet trainee, Eugeo-dono?!"

"That was a peculiar story indeed! To think you would accuse others of being shameful when you were so fond of getting naked yourself, ha-ha!"

Humbert immediately went with the flow as well, laughing in his shrill voice.

Eugeo's entire body trembled uncontrollably as the impulse earlier assailed him once again. The moment he was about to voice out a curse that would barely fall short of violating the academy regulations, Kirito made a noise by placing a kick on his heel from behind, making him narrowly recover his senses.

His mentor, Gorgolosso, certainly did order him to remove everything except his underwear once or twice a month. However, that was to confirm how his muscles were and to point out the training he lacked, without even a single trace of dubious implication. But even if he were to refute it that way, Raio and Humbert would probably get ahead of themselves even further and mock not only Eugeo, but Gorgolosso as well. That was why Eugeo tried his best to hold on and quietly spoke after managing to regain his calm somehow.

"My case is unrelated to this situation. What is certain here, is that the valet trainee for Swordsman-in-training Zizek has not been going against orders even while going through intolerable experiences day after day. If I don't see any change for the better from now on, I would have to consider requesting the instructors to conduct an investigation, so kindly keep that in mind."

Please do as you like; those words came from behind as Eugeo quickly left Raio's room, accompanied by laughter.

No sooner had the door closed behind him than Eugeo clenched his right fist with the intention to strike the wall, but he then noticed that if he were to do that with the physical strength he had built up, he might make a dent in the wall—or in other words, lower the building's Life, and reluctantly lowered his arm. Damaging the academy's facilities or fixtures was a clear violation of the Taboo Index and in the first place, it would be the very example of venting anger. He felt a slight longing for the Gigas Cedar that was practically unyielding, regardless of how many times he struck it with that axe filled with resentment from one thing or another.

As a modest substitute, he made noises wrecking his shoe soles as he started to walk towards his own room on the west, and Kirito spoke from behind.

"Take a moment to calm down, Eugeo."

The moment that familiar voice reached Eugeo's ears, the insides of his head, burning red like a fireplace, cooled down a little and he took a long breath. Easing his pace, he walked by his partner's side.

"...But still, that was unexpected. I totally thought you would explode before I would."

Towards Eugeo's words, Kirito showed a broad grin and hit his left waist.

"It would have turned bad if I had a sword. It's just that... like I said earlier, they might have something else planned, so I managed to hold myself back and look at the situation somehow."

"That reminds me, you did say something like that. I completely forgot about it... —So, what do you think?"

"Leaving Humbert aside, the provocation from that bastard Raios was definitely on purpose, Eugeo. He probably took Tiezé and Ronye conveying Frenica's story to you into account and planned to impose the maximum punishment onto you if you went too far in your remarks towards Humbert back then, as disrespectful behavior. We really can't look down on the craftiness of that upper class noble, huh..."

"In other words... the reason why Raios left Humbert's actions alone was because he predicted that I would come protest, huh... What a disaster..."

Eugeo stopped in the middle of the corridor and strongly bit his lips.

"This is all due to me humiliating Humbert in that match, isn't it. And you've always said nothing good would come out of reacting to their provocation too..."

"Don't blame yourself so much."

Kirito placed his hand onto Eugeo's right shoulder and let out a rare comforting voice.

"In any case, the first official match will be here soon. We've got no choice but to beat those guys if we want to represent the academy, so we'll earn their resentment sooner or later. But seeing as that bunch had such a huge laugh about it, they should be satisfied for the time being. Just in case Humbert were to continue humiliating Frenica, we might want to prepare a letter in advance, to immediately request for an investigation from the instructors at least, though."

"...Yeah, that's right. But if that really happens, us bawling in front of those guys like a couple of babies might have been more persuasive."

Lightly patting Kirito's hand to show his gratitude, Eugeo finally released the tension in his shoulders.

Both Humbert and Raios were strong with the sword, and even their grades in the academics were good. They received an abundant allowance of Shear gold coins from their families every month, were able to buy as many clothes and personal accessories as they wanted and if they were to get fed up with the dormitory's meals, they could eat whatever they liked in the restaurants outside the school every night if they wished. It certainly was enviable from the point of views of Eugeo and Kirito who get by somehow with the money saved up from the time they were guards in Zakkaria.

And yet, why do they view Eugeo as an enemy, ridiculing him at every turn and trying to make him surrender? And consequently, what do they intend to gain from it? He did realize that the world wasn't full of good people, that there were unkind ones around at least, but still—even if they were noble and commoner, they were both fellow people born in this Human World.

This was what the Axiom Church taught. That the Human World made by the God, Stacia, was affiliated to «Good» and the Land of Darkness ruled over by the God, Vector, was affiliated to «Bad». If that was the case, no matter what sort of human it is, they should possess a good heart as their base. Yes, even if it was Raios or Humbert.

If they were to cross swords not in a haphazard duel, but on the grand stage of the official match instead and show each other all of their skill and power, they would definitely come to terms with several things. —Definitely.

Thinking about such things while opening the door to his room and entering it, Eugeo declared before his partner disappeared off somewhere.

"Hey, Kirito, the sacred arts examination's over, so I'll have you accompany me for lots of practice from tomorrow onwards!"

"What, you're certainly fired up, aren't you."

"Aah... I have to get much, much stronger, after all. To teach Raio and Humbert that the sword isn't as generous as to let them win without any practice."

Upon hearing that, Kirito nodded with a grin.

"Well then, should I teach you just how intense training can get, Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono?"

"That's what I hoped for. ...Then, see you at dinnertime."

They both lightly raised their hands and returned to their individual rooms to change, but his partner stopped while turning around and spoke with a serious look.

"Eugeo. No matter what those guys tell you when I'm not around, be careful not to get heated up like earlier."

"I-I understand that. *Stay cool*, right?"

Upon voicing out that which had both the meaning of keeping one's composure in the Sacred Tongue, and that of a parting phrase, Kirito made a bitter smile, seemingly embarrassed, while replying with the same phrase.

Perhaps satisfied after laughing so much, Raio and Humbert paid no attention to Eugeo throughout the practical swordsmanship exercises in the morning and the specialized lessons in the afternoon the next day. Even Humbert, who had sent him a scowl filled with resentment each time their faces met until the previous week, persevered in completely ignoring him.

Of course, Eugeo felt considerably relieved, but the problem was whether he mended his ways towards Frenica or not. He had jointly written and signed an investigation request letter addressed to the academy's management the previous night with Kirito. If it was tendered, an official hearing would be conducted with both parties on both Raio's and Eugeo's sides, but even those two should want to avoid that, considering how much they valued their prestige.

Just as the boring empire history lecture—after all, incidents that really could be classified as incidents rarely ever happened—ended, Eugeo parted with Kirito, who went to the library to return a book, then returned straight to the swordsmen-in-training's dormitory and waited for Tiezé and Ronye so as to deliver the progress of the case.

Before long, while the four o'clock bell rang at its scheduled time everyday, those two came and started on the cleaning up after an energetic greeting. Eugeo sat on the chair in his room, having nothing to do, and obediently looked over the gallant figure of Tiezé laboring away.

He offered his help in cleaning more times than he could count previously, but was flatly refused with a "This is my important responsibility!" every time. Thinking back, he recalled that he had told Gorgolosso the same thing himself, so he reluctantly tried his best not to make the room too untidy, but the girl wasn't satisfied with that either, always having the strange complaint that there wasn't enough to clean up.

Bustling around with a long cloth mop in hand, Tiezé finished cleaning the living area and bedrooms in thirty minutes and entered Eugeo's room, closed the door behind her and snapped the heels of her leather shoes together.

"Elite Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono, I would like to report! The cleaning for today is complete!"

It seems Kirito had returned without him noticing too, with Ronye's voice faintly audible beyond the closed door. Leaving the relaying of information there to his partner, Eugeo answered Tiezé with a short acknowledgement.

"Yes, good job. Thanks as always."

"No, not at all. This is the valet's duty!"

He quietly held back a smile that almost unintentionally formed at that routine reply.

"Erm... I apologize, but could I talk to you about a little something? There's no need to stand up, so have a seat."

Upon voicing that out, he recalled that this room only had one chair, the one for the writing desk. The moment he said "Then over here", Tiezé shook her head with a "No, I'll keep standing", so Eugeo interrupted with a "Then, how about over there?" with his finger pointed at the bed by the window side.

Tiezé opened her eyes wide for an instant and nodded with an indistinct blush on her face this time.

"Ye-... th-then, please excuse me."

She trotted close to its edge and softly sat down.

Sitting on the same bed as a girl wasn't a violation of the Taboo Index or the academy regulation, was it, Eugeo confirmed in his mind before sitting quite a distance away, and after turning only his upper body towards Tiezé, he started on the main topic with the most serious face he could make.

"About Frenica's case... we went to complain to Humbert yesterday. That guy probably doesn't want to blow it up any further either, so I doubt he'll be giving out anymore of those unbefitting orders. I'll make him apologize properly as well soon, so..."

"Really?! ...I'm so glad, thank you very much, Elite Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono. I believe Frenica will be glad to hear this as well."

Faced with a suddenly smiling Tiezé, Eugeo spoke with a wry smile.

"You're already done with your work, so just call me Eugeo. But still... there's something I have to apologize for too. I mentioned it a little yesterday as well, but my duel with Humbert was the origin for the case this time, and it might have been a scheme to impose punishment onto me for disrespectful behavior when I went in to protest... In other words, Frenica got mixed up in the conflict between Humbert and me. I would like to properly apologize to her as well, so could you get me an opportunity to do so...?"

"...I... see..."

Tiezé shook her red hair as she lowered her face as though she was pondering about something, but she soon looked at Eugeo and gently shook her head.

"No, it's not your fault, Elite... Eugeo-senpai. I'll simply convey your words to Frenica. Erm... m-may I sit a little closer?"

"Eh... s-sure."

Eugeo nodded nervously and Tiezé's cheeks flushed red as she shifted herself, close enough for him to faintly feel her body warmth. Looking towards the wall in front, her voice flowed out as a whisper.

"Eugeo-senpai, I tried thinking as hard as I could before I slept last night. About why Elite Swordsman-in-training Zizek-dono did those horrible things to Frenica, how he could do those things when he felt neither hatred nor resentment for her. ...Kirito-senpai said that nobles must maintain their pride. But... I

actually knew. That there are some among the upper class nobles that, erm... toy with the women who live on their own land to satisfy their own whims..."

Tiezé suddenly raised her face and stared into Eugeo with those eyes that reminded one of an autumn forest, wet after a long spell of rain.

"...I'm scared. I believe I will succeed the Shtolienen family not long after I graduate from the academy, and end up accepting a groom from a noble family of the same rank or one higher. ...What if the person who becomes my spouse turns out to be someone like Zizek-dono...? When I just think of what would happen if it turns out to be the type of person without pride and nonchalantly menaces others around... I get... so scared that I..."

Eugeo held his breath and looked back at Tiezé's cloudy eyes.

He was aware of Tiezé's feelings but at the same time, those words couldn't help but to draw attention to the difference in social status between the girl and himself. Compared to Tiezé Shtolienen, the eldest child of a splendid name-bearing sixth class noble family, Eugeo was a child of peasants without a surname—not to mention the third son.

In a small, remote village like Rulid, as there was a limit to the harvest from the fertile land, they could not increase their numbers infinitely. The one to succeed the house and fields was almost always without exception, the eldest son, with the second son, third son and so on—though it depended on their Sacred Task—not even permitted to marry, often growing old without a partner. If he hadn't met Kirito, even Eugeo would have spent his entire life swinging an axe every day on «cutting duty for the Gigas Cedar». Just like his predecessor, that old man, Garitta.

He was living and mingling with many nobles in Central Centoria at this very moment, but he did not know what would happen a year later if he failed to become the representative swordsman for the academy. It would be fine if he gained employment in the Imperial Knight Order or the guard squadron of some big city, otherwise, he could only return to Rulid and work under his elder brothers. At the very least, it was certain that he had absolutely no prospects of inheriting a noble family.

That was why when Tiezé clung onto his right arm while he stayed silent, it was startling enough to take his breath away.

"Eh... Tiezé...!?"

The girl born of a sixth class noble family stared into Eugeo's widely opened eyes from up close. From the grey uniform hung a faint smell that reminded one of solbe leaves.

"Eugeo-senpai... I, erm... have a request to ask of you. You must definitely represent the academy, win the swordsmanship tournament and participate in the Four Empires Unity Tournament."

"Th-That's... of course, it's my goal, but..."

"Erm... well..."

Tiezé was at a loss for words for an instant, then continued with her face as bright red as her hair.

"I-I heard that if you get a high placing in the Unity Tournament, you will be inducted as an aristocrat for life, like Azurika-sensei from the novice trainees' dormitory. Erm, then... I really shouldn't be saying this, but... if you don't become an integrity knight, please..... become my... my....."

Any further words seemed to have been lost before they were voiced out, as Tiezé shivered with her head lowered downwards; Eugeo gazed down at that small head.

It was only this time that he understood what Tiezé was talking about, though it took some time. Swallowing down his saliva, a tiny voice of his own reverberated in his head.

—I'm aiming for the Unity Tournament to become an integrity knight and meet with Alice once more, that's the only reason—

However, he could not tell Tiezé that. Even if it ends up being a lie, he felt it not right to brush aside the earnest wish of a sixteen years old girl, who was probably frightened by her uncertain future for the first time in her life... not to mention her being his own valet trainee.

Raising his left hand, Eugeo awkwardly stroked Tiezé's head as he spoke.

"Yeah... I got it. I'll definitely look for you after the tournament ends."

Tiezé's shoulders quivered uncontrollably upon hearing that and she timidly raised her face before long.

A smile, resembling a flower bud in early spring, appeared on her cheeks glistening with tears and Tiezé moved her modest lips.

"...I will-I will get stronger too. Strong enough to be like Eugeo-senpai... to be able to say out those proper things that must be said."

Part 4

The day that was due to begin next, the 22nd day of the 5th month, was the first with stormy weather for that spring.

Riding the squalls that sprung up at times, large drops of rain furiously drummed against the window. Eugeo halted the hand that was polishing his sword and gazed at the stormy skies that had lost the light of Solus, despite it not being long since the end of the lectures.

The black clouds that stretched out in layers squirmed as though they were alive and violet lightning tore through their gaps. The spring storms that washed away the wheat seeds just sown were detested by everyone in Rulid Village, and it almost always became as bustling as a festival whenever Alice succeeded in weather prediction sacred arts, even though she was a child. But then again, they were only really given that blessing for a paltry two years.

Now that Eugeo had practiced sacred arts in the academy, he was now truly aware of Alice's genius. Arts that affect principles of nature, such as weather and terrain, were examples of high ranking sacred arts, possessing procedures reaching over a hundred lines, with Eugeo unable to even predict whether tomorrow would be sunny or rainy as he currently was. If it was Alice, who could predict a storm a week before it came, she might even be picking up the arts to manipulate the weather right about now. If that was the case, the current look of the sky might be Alice losing her temper at Eugeo for still not coming for her—

"Haah."

Expelling his incessant thoughts along with his breath, he suddenly started to thoroughly and carefully polish the bluish-silver blade with the oiled leather. He never missed the weekly maintenance on the «Blue Rose Sword», but that was roughly the only time he drew it from its scabbard from the time he had been admitted into the academy. He used the wooden sword for daily practice and in official matches, as there was a regulation to use swords with the exact same capability to ensure fairness. Compared to the Blue Rose Sword that was classified as a sacred instrument, the sword issued by the academy was rather light and he felt nervous with how much the blade seemed like it would slip out when he swung it with all his might, but he couldn't simply wave this sword around when it could break a cheap iron sword with a single exchanged blow.

An opponent that he could strike as hard as he liked with this sword was probably restricted to *that*; with that thought in his mind, Eugeo raised his head and looked at the black long sword his partner was maintaining on the opposing couch.

The «demonic tree» that had towered over the forest south of Rulid for over three hundred years, the Gigas Cedar. Having cut the topmost branch from it, with its weight more than that of the Blue Rose Sword, carrying it had been difficult—Kirito had said at least thirty times "That's enough let's just plant it over there and go"—before bringing it to the central capital, where old man Garitta had told them of the artisan Sadre, an acquaintance of his from long ago, and had been able to get it refined.

Sadre-shi, the very image of eccentricity, had scowled as hard as he could while grumbling, "It even broke three of my carborundum grinding stones which should have lasted for at least ten years" but he didn't take any money, saying that it was a once in a lifetime job.

The completed black sword was covered in a deep luster that made it hard to believe it was originally a tree branch. Kirito used that sword to bring a duel with Uolo Levanteinn to a commendable draw two and a half months ago, but he shouldn't have touched it at all since then, leaving it stored in its black leather scabbard except during maintenance time.

Or possibly, we might not have the chance to use these two swords anymore, or at least, not while in school; such a thought now came to Eugeo. It couldn't be used in the academy's official matches and he found it hard to imagine himself fighting other students in a duel with «personal real swords used».

In other words, if he wanted to fight with the Blue Rose Sword in hand, he would have to be selected as the academy representative swordsman this year and participate in the Empire Swordsmanship Tournament. Of course, that was Eugeo's aim, but he had doubts about freely swinging this heavy sword around on a large stage all of a sudden, not to mention in a first strike match.

The participant who he would be going against would likely not be a student, but masters from the Imperial Knight Order or the main families of the various swordsmanship schools, which would mean that the other side would have a magnificent sharp sword made by a skilled craftsman as well. Even if it was a one-strike match, there was obviously the possibility of getting a major injury that would take about one or two months to fully recover from, if he were to receive a bad hit in his vitals, assuming he even managed to keep his life.

Actually, both of the academy's representatives, Uolo Levanteinn and Sortiliena-senpai had gone up against the representative from the Knight Order and lost, but while Liena-senpai was stopped by having her whip cut and her sword blasted away, Uolo got the bones in his left shoulder smashed to pieces. Medical treatment performed through the usual sacred arts could seal the wound and stop the decreasing Life, but the bones couldn't be re-attached together and Uolo should still be under medical care, even now.

According to the newspaper pasted onto the bulletin board at the main school building weekly, it seemed that the swordsman who represented the Knight Order was from the Woolsburg family, a first class noble family that was considered renowned even among the renowned empire nobles. There was an article about how the swordsman went to the «Four Empire Unity Tournament» in the fourth month, after the Swordsmanship Tournament, achieved a magnificent victory, and received the honor of an invitation to the Axiom Church's holy garden.

It could be said that it couldn't be helped that Liena-senpai and Uolo Levanteinn lost to such an opponent—but Eugeo had a need to win, no matter what kind of hero might appear as his opponent. He must continue onto the Unity Tournament next year as the representative of Norlangarth and be the champion, going through the gates of the Central Cathedral. He must.

—I'll be counting on you then, please lend me your power.

He finished polishing even the tip of his beloved sword as he spoke to it in his heart and when he raised his face, Kirito had just slid his sword out from between the two sides of the folded oiled leather with a swoosh sound as well. His eyes were momentarily taken in by the jet-black blade that shone under the lamp's light before he called out.

"Hey, Kirito."

"Nn?"

"Haven't you thought of a proper name for that sword yet?"

This was the fourth time Eugeo had asked that question since the sword was completed, but Kirito still replied with the same answer.

"Um, hmm... not yet..."

"Hurry up and decide already. It's pitiful for the sword, being called that «black one» all the time, isn't it."

"Hmm... from where I came from, swords had their names from the start... or so I think."

The moment he was about to offer more advice to Kirito who was muttering out vague excuses, his partner suddenly reached out his own hand towards Eugeo's eyes and caused him to blink.

"Wh-What is it?"

"Wait a minute, wasn't that the four-thirty bell just now?"

"Eh..."

Upon straining his ears, he certainly could hear the faltering chimes of the bell mixed into the howls of the wind.

"You're right, it's this late already. We missed the four o'clock bell, huh."

Eugeo muttered and when he looked out of the window mostly absent of sunlight, Kirito muttered with a grave expression.

"They're late, huh, Ronye and Tiezé."

Eugeo was taken aback and swallowed his breath. Now that it was mentioned, Tiezé and Ronye have never missed coming to clean up the room before the four o'clock bell even once since those two had become their valets. Forcing back the unease oozing its way out from his throat, he lightly shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, there's a storm. Aren't they waiting for the rain to stop? It's not like the time to start cleaning was fixed by the academy regulations or anything..."

"I wonder if those two would even be late due to rain..."

Kirito seemed like he was brooding on something as he dropped his sight back to his hand and immediately continued.

"I have a bad feeling about this. I'll go over to the novice trainees' dormitory for a bit. We might miss each other, so Eugeo, please wait for those two over here."

Quickly slotting the black sword that he had finished maintaining back into its scabbard, Kirito left it on the table and stood up. Putting on the thin overcoat for protection against the rain, he fastened the clasp with his left hand while opening the window with his right.

"Hey, Kirito, you should go from the front, shouldn't..."

Eugeo tried to say so while scowling at the strong winds that wildly blew in with the rain, but his partner had already nimbly jumped onto a tree branch that hung near the window by then, leaving behind only a rustling noise as he vanished. Geez, he's just so impatient, Eugeo thought with a sigh as he closed the window left open.

With the din of the storm muffled, the sound of the wall lamp burning away felt awfully loud in return.

Returning to the couch while holding onto the unexplained feeling of unease, he picked up the Blue Rose Sword from the table and gently stored it into its scabbard.

There was a way to find the whereabouts of certain people through high ranking sacred arts, but it required a large amount of sacred power in the area, so it couldn't be used without a medium. In the first place, using sacred arts with others as the target within the academy was prohibited, even if the art was harmless. As he was right now, Eugeo could only sit down on the couch and wait for something to happen.

Several remarkably long minutes passed by—finally, a soft knocking sound reverberated within the room.

The instant he heard that, Eugeo let out a deep breath of air. Well, look at that, you missed them all because you left from the window; he got up from the couch with that in mind, quickly crossed the room and opened the door.

"Thank goodness, I was so worried about..."

Reaching that point, Eugeo swallowed his words in mute astonishment. The hair that flew into his field of vision was not the familiar red or dark brown, but a light brown, disheveled by the wind.

It wasn't Ronye or Tiezé, but an unknown girl that was standing in the corridor. The short hair and grey novice trainee uniform was drenched by the rain, and absolutely no blood seemed to be flowing in those cheeks with drops of water hanging off them. Opening those large eyes, which reminded one of a young deer, filled with worry, her pale lips trembled haltingly.

Looking up at Eugeo who stood frozen, the girl forced her feeble voice out.

"Erm... are you Elite Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono...?"

"Ah... y-yeah. You are...?"

"I... I am Novice Trainee Frenica Szeski. I apologize for visiting without any prior notification. ...But, I didn't know what I should do..."

"So you're... Frenica, huh."

Eugeo looked back at the petite novice trainee once again. He looked at her delicate build rather unlike that of a swordswoman and those small hands that seemed more suited to knotting flower garlands, feeling his anger at Humbert well up once again, for disgracing a girl like this at his whims.

However, before Eugeo could say anything, Frenica, who had her two hands tightly grasped together in front of her chest, let out a voice blemished with panic.

"Erm... I am truly thankful for you lending your assistance regarding the matter between Humbert Zizek-dono and myself from the depths of my heart, Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono. And... I believe you understood what had happened so far, so I'll omit them, but... Zizek-dono ordered me to, well... perform a certain service that is somewhat difficult for me to explain in this place..."

Likely feeling enough humiliation to set her body aflame through those words alone, Frenica's pallid face stiffened pitifully before she continued.

"I-If I am to continue with such orders, I... I would rather quit the academy; that was what I frankly told Tiezé and Ronye, but upon hearing that, the two said that they would appeal directly to Zizek-dono and left the dormitory..."

"What did you say."

Eugeo muttered in a cracked voice. His fingertips that held onto the white leather scabbard became chilled.

"But those two haven't returned no matter how much I waited, so I-I don't know what I should do..."

"When did those two leave...?"

"Erm, I believe it was right after the three-thirty bell rang."

Over an hour had already passed. Eugeo swallowed his breath as he stared at the door by the corridor. That would mean that Tiezé and Ronye were already on the third floor of the same swordsmen-in-training's dormitory? They were taking too long if they were there to protest and appeal.

He swiftly turned about and looked at the windows that were getting battered by the wind and rain as always, but there was no sign of Kirito returning. It would take fifteen minutes to simply go to the novice trainees' dormitory and return in this storm. Judging that there certainly was no time to wait, he rapidly talked to Frenica.

"Got it. I'll go take a look, so wait in this room. ...Also, if Kirito gets back, could you tell him to come over to Humbert's and Raios' room?"

Leaving behind Frenica nodding with anxiety, Eugeo left the room. It was after he took several steps across the corridor with parquet flooring that he noticed he had brought along the Blue Rose Sword that he had finished maintaining, but time was too precious to return and put it back. Hanging his left hand loose, he rushed eastwards down the curved corridor.

With each step, he felt the lump of worry growing heavier deep in his heart.

The reason why Tiezé and Ronye had come up with the plan to appeal directly was clear. It was because Eugeo and Kirito had failed to achieve anything even when they went to protest, and one other thing. Those words that Tiezé had said in Eugeo's room yesterday—that she would get stronger and say those proper things; the girl was likely putting that into practice.

But that might very well be...

"Was that their plan from the start? Not me, but Tiezé and Ronye...?"

Eugeo spoke as though he was groaning while he ran.

Among fellow trainees or swordsmen-in-training, most remarks wouldn't cause much of a problem. However, it would be a different story if it was a novice trainee protesting against an elite swordsman-in-training. Unless much caution was taken with the words used, it would come under the acts of disrespect decreed by the academy regulations. And in that case, the swordsman-in-training could exercise the «Punishment Authority» as a substitute for an instructor. Similar to how Kirito had stained Uolo Levanteinn's uniform with dirt in the past.

Eugeo tried his best to flip through the pages of the academy regulations in his mind.

—In the case that the elite swordsman-in-training exercises the punishment authority, one among the three orders noted below is permitted. One, cleaning the academy premises (specifics on the area are recorded in a different paragraph). Two, training using wooden swords (specifics on the details are recorded in a different paragraph). Third, a duel with the swordsman-in-training in question (specifics on the match regulations are recorded in a different paragraph). In addition, provisions from any superior laws will take precedence regarding all of the punishments.

In this case, those superior laws would refer to the Empire Fundamental Law and of course, the Taboo Index. In other words, the taboo of reducing another's Life without a justifiable reason would take precedence over the punishment authority. Even if Humbert were to order Tiezé and Ronye for a duel, requesting for the first-strike rule rather than stopping before hitting, he could not physically harm them if they rejected it. As such, there should not be much need for worry even with Humbert exercising the punishment authority.

But still, the anxiety that felt like it was stabbed into his heart showed no sign of going away.

Coming to a stop in front of the closed door at the east most side of the third floor corridor that ran in an circular arc, Eugeo violently knocked on it with his right fist without waiting for his breathing to get under control.

Several seconds later, he could hear Humbert's mumbling voice from inside.

"My my, you're here pretty late, Elite Swordsman Eugeo-dono. Now now, please enter!"

With that manner of speaking that practically said that he had been expected, Eugeo opened the door in one go, feeling rather impatient.

With the extended light from the high quality lamp whittled down, the shared living room was quite a bit dimmer than the previous day. Not to mention a strong smell of the east region burned, causing a dull haze in the room. Frowning at the harsh odor, he quickly swept through the room with his sight.

The forms of Raio and Humbert with the same thin long garments as the previous day were on the couch in the middle. With his back facing Eugeo, Raio had his two feet on the table as expected, holding onto a thin glass with his left hand. The shallow dark red fluid poured into it appeared to be grape wine. Drinking alcohol in the dormitory was allowed with restrictions for elite swordsmen-in-training, but drinking despite it not being a rest day was nothing to be proud of.

Humbert who sat opposite appeared to have partaken in the alcohol as well. A slack smile showed itself on his slightly reddish face and he spoke while looking up at Eugeo.

"No need to keep standing, how about taking a seat, Eugeo-dono. We just happened to open up a fifty year old one from the west empire. It's not quite something a commoner can lay his hands on easily, you know?"

Feeling even more discomfort from Humbert who not only offered a seat, but even wine to him, Eugeo silently surveyed the room in detail. He could see that there wasn't anyone aside from the three of them in the room despite how dim it was.

Did Raio and Tiezé not come here, or have they already left? If that was the case, why had they not come to Kirito's and Eugeo's room on the same floor— Several questions ran through his mind, but Eugeo first loosened the tension in his shoulders and lightly shook his head.

"No, I don't drink. Rather than that, Swordsman-in-training Zizek-dono..."

Taking a step forward, he asked a question while picking his words with care.

"This may be abrupt, but have the novice trainees, my valet, Tiezé Shtolienen, and Swordsman-in-training Kirito's valet, Raio Arabel, visited this room this very day?"

The one who responded to Eugeo's cracked voice was not Humbert, but Raio Antinous, who continued to face him with his back. He looked over his shoulder while carrying the glass with his left hand, looking at Eugeo closely with narrowed eyes.

"...Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono, your face appears unwell. How about it, have a glass?"

"Your consideration is unnecessary. Could I have you answer the question?"

"Fufu, what a pity. It truly is the bare minimum level of consideration I should treat a friend with, you know?"

Eugeo noticed the sweat dripping down his left hand as it tightly held the sword's scabbard. Raio looked over Eugeo as though taking his state as an appetizer to go with the wine and licked the glass before returning it to the table.

"Fmm. ...So those two were Eugeo-dono's and Kirito-dono's valets?"

Upon saying so in his viscid tone, he licked up the drops that remained on his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"They certainly were brave novice trainees, to suddenly request for a meeting with the head as well as the second-ranked elite swordsmen-in-training who stand above all of the students. As expected of the

valets belonging to the two of you. However, you should take care. That assertiveness could be impolite at times, and disrespectful at others. Don't you think so too, Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono? ...No, I might have spoken out of turn. I suppose it's too much to ask for the etiquette of a noble from Eugeo-dono, isn't it, fufu, fufufu..."

As expected, Tiezé and Ronye had come here.

Holding back the impulse to grab hold of the nape of that long garment Raios was wearing, Eugeo asked in a strained tone.

"Kindly spare me your opinion until another day. Tell me where are Tiezé and Ronye right now."

Upon doing so, it was Humbert's turn to pour the grape wine and speak this time, as though he was annoyed.

"...Eugeo-dono, is the burden not too hard on you? A woodcutter from the outskirts like you guiding the daughter of a noble house, though she may be of the lowest class? Kukuku, that's right... it's due to your lack of guidance that those two treated me, the eldest son of a fourth class noble family, with such a lack of respect, Eugeo-dono. As such, I had to fulfill my noble responsibilities despite my complete reluctance to do so. It is the duty of the upper class aristocrats to keep the lower class aristocrats in check, after all."

"Humbert-dono...! Just what..."

-did you do; Eugeo wanted to argue, but he was restrained by Humbert with his left hand, who then drank up what was in the glass in a single gulp and stood up. Following that, Raios got up as well, before the both of them took a few steps to the eastern side of the room.

The sons of upper class nobles stood in a line and exchanged glances with their mouths twisted into the same venomous smile, the resemblance of that making them seem like brothers.

"...Now then, shall we have Eugeo-dono enjoy the finest act of the day, Raios-dono?"

"Yes, Humbert. There is still one lacking in the audience, but I've gotten rather tired of waiting. It's fine, he will probably come running up before long."

"...Act... tired of waiting...?"

At Eugeo showing his surprise once again, Humbert visibly jerked his long and narrow chin. The two fluttered the hems of their long garments, walking towards the bedroom to the west. Eugeo reluctantly chased after them with uncertain steps.

Beyond the door Humbert opened was a dense darkness filled with a suffocating amount of aromatic smoke. Raios first entered and Humbert then followed behind, disappearing into the darkness.

Seeing the light purple smoke seeping out as though it was lurking about the bed, Eugeo stopped in his tracks. He felt like that smoke should not exist in this Sword Mastery Academy—no, in this entire, vast Human World; it was a smoke of pure evil. More so than the smoke from the bonfire built by those abominable residents of darkness—that group of goblins he had encountered underground in the mountain range at the edge two years ago.

It was when he was about to involuntarily turn his head away. He thought he could faintly smell a slight, cool and clean scent drifting around. A familiar smell that closely resembled that of solbe leaves.

It was the smell around Tiezé's uniform.

".....Tiezé... Ronye...!"

While calling out the valet trainees' names, the wall lamp lit up the instant he rushed into the bedroom.

What Eugeo saw—were the two girls lying down in a line on a large canopy bed. No, to be more specific, they were rolled there. After all, both of them were bound up with several layers of a bright red rope atop their grey novice trainee uniforms. Perhaps due to the dense aroma drifting in the air, those red and brown eyes stayed still, staring blankly into space, as if half of their consciousness was in disarray.

"Wha... wh-why did..."

As he murmured in astonishment, Eugeo realized he should free the two of their bonds before anything else and ran up to the bed. However-

"Please, do not move!"

Shouting out sharply, Raios extended his palm right in front of Eugeo's eyes. Reluctantly shifting his vision to him, Eugeo wringed his hoarse voice out.

"Wh... What exactly is this, Raios-dono! Why have our valets been subjected to..."

"This treatment was unavoidable, Eugeo-dono."

"Unavoid... able...?"

"Affirmative. Novice Trainees Shtolienen and Arabel visited this evening without even a prior enquiry for a meeting and furthermore, committed an act of excessive disrespect upon us."

"Disrespect... you say....."

With Eugeo surprised yet again, Humbert stepped forward from the wall and answered with a broad grin.

"And it was in an outrageous manner of speech. I wish you could have heard them... of all things, those lower class noble girls had to tell me about how I, a fourth class aristocrat, had been oppressing my own valet without any reason, satisfying my own lust and such. To me, the second-rank elite swordsman-in-training who has been trying to guide Frenica on the right path, you know? —No matter how tolerant I may be, I certainly couldn't overlook an act of disrespect of that level."

"That wasn't all to it, Eugeo-dono. Those two even told me about the responsibility I held for being in the same room as Humbert, and such things that couldn't be further away from the truth. When I answered that I had no idea what they were talking about, it was such a surprise... to think the daughters of sixth class noble families would try to ask the eldest son of a third class noble family like myself, 'Don't you have the pride of a noble?! Dear me, I didn't know what I was to do.'"

Raios and Humbert exchanged glances again at that point, stifled laughter escaping from them going, kukuku, or, fufufu. They knew the valet, Frenica, was on good terms with Tiezé and Ronye, then continued the abuse and humiliation due to that. Until Tiezé and Ronye arrived in this room to protest directly.

Of course, they probably picked their words carefully at first. However, they were definitely provoked by Raios' and Humbert's evasive way of speaking before finally letting out some words that could be considered as disrespectful behavior.

—However.

"...But, Raios-dono. Even if that really happened... I do believe that tying them up with a rope and locking them away in your bedroom greatly deviates from the swordsmen-in-training's punishment authority...!"

Restraining his feelings from bursting out as well this time, Eugeo pointed that out.

Tiezé and Ronye seemed to be only bound above their uniform, without any injuries on their bodies. But the academy regulations recognized only three kinds of punishments against trainees with disrespectful behavior; cleaning, practice and a duel. It was clear that binding with a rope went under none of those. In other words, Raios' and Humbert's actions were against the academy regulations—

"Swordsmen-in-training's punishment authority?"

Abruptly muttering so, Raios bent his tall figure and closed in to Eugeo's face.

"Since when did I say that I used a privilege used to deceive little kids like the punishment authority?"

"Wh... What do you mean? The specifics on punishments for acts of disrespect from trainees are strictly noted in the academy regulations..."

"That would be your misunderstanding. Did you forget this note in the academy regulations? —That in addition, provisions from any superior laws will take precedence regarding all of the punishments."

Raios suddenly changed his facial expression then. Excessively raising the two ends of his red lips, a sadistic smile never seen before showed itself.

"Those superior laws would be the Taboo Index and the Empire Fundamental Law. As such, I am unable to reduce the Life of those girls one-sidedly. The rope used is a high-quality item made from the easily stretchable silk of the east region, you see... it's an excellent item that won't cause any injury no matter how hard I tie them."

"B-But! No matter how high-quality the rope might be, the punishment of tying students up with it is..."

"Do you still not understand, Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono? Superior laws will take precedence; in other words... what I, the eldest son of a third class noble family, could exercise on those daughters of sixth class noble families is **not the swordsmen-in-training's punishment authority, but the authority to judge of the nobles!**"

—Authority to judge, of the nobles.

The instant he heard that phrase, Eugeo recalled Tiezé's words from the time they played at the forest the other day.

The nobles' authority to judge was bestowed upon aristocrats of the fourth class and above, while those from the fifth class and below were the targets of those judgements instead...

As if enjoying Eugeo's dumbfounded facial expression, Raios kept silent for a while but soon swung his two arms apart with a much louder cry, an action like that of a play.

"And that authority to judge is the highest privilege of the upper class nobles! It may only be exercised upon fifth and sixth class aristocrats and their families, as well as those commoners who live on my land, but the specifics of the punishment are mine to decide! Certainly, those may not go against the Taboo Index, but if you turn it around, everything is possible as long as it's not a taboo!"

After hearing that much, Eugeo finally recovered from his shock and opened his mouth.

"But... but still! Even if you say everything is possible, isn't tying up fifteen and sixteen year old girls simply too horrible..."

"Haha... hahaha, hahahahaha!!"

Suddenly, Humbert raised his shrill laughter. Disheveling the hem of his yellow long garment, he continued sneering as his body shivered.

"Hahaha, th-this is a masterpiece, Raios-dono! It looks like Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono still believes that our judgement was merely playing with that rope!"

"Ku-kuh, it can't be helped, Humbert. Even if he came to this faraway central from his remote mountain village, he's still a commoner as a swordsman-in-training! Well, today will probably be the day for Eugeo-dono to find out... just what exalted presences we are, as upper class nobles!"

Declaring so, Raios turned about—

Upon walking up to the bed Tiezé and Ronye laid on, he placed his knee onto the sheets without any hesitation. The bedframe creaked and Tiezé, still stuck in a haze, endlessly blinked her eyes.

Those red eyes slowly opened, and caught sight of Raios about to stretch over herself. In that instant, a delicate voice shook the bedroom.

"No... No...!"

Distorting her body, she tried to escape, but could not as both her arms and legs were bound. Raios' moist, naked white hand reached out and caressed Tiezé's cheeks.

At his side, Humbert who followed after him onto the bed was creeping his hand across Ronye's legs. Though being the one to awaken later, Ronye understood the situation and a wordless shriek escaped her lips.

Eugeo finally understood the contents of the «judgement» happening a mere three mel ahead of him.

Raios and Humbert were disgracing Tiezé's and Ronye's bodies with their own. They were forcing an act, allowed only between a man and woman who were married under the blessing of Stacia—or so Eugeo believed, under the nobles' authority to judge.

The moment he understood, Eugeo cried out.

"Stop it...!!"

It happened the moment he took a step towards the bed. Raising his face swiftly, Raios had a fiery gleam in his eyes as he shouted.

"Do not move, commoner!!"

With his right hand still teasing Tiezé's face, he pointed at Eugeo's face with his left.

"This is the just and solemn judgement of a noble in accordance to the Empire Fundamental Law as well as the Taboo Index! Also, obstruction of the authority to judge is a serious crime! Move another step from where you are and you'll be branded a criminal who broke the law!"

"Who..."

the heck cares about that!

Get away from Tiezé and Ronye!

Eugeo tried to shout thus. He tried to do so while lunging at Raios. However.

His feet suddenly stopped by themselves as though they were nailed to the floor. The excess momentum made him fall onto his knees. He flustered as he tried to get up, but his legs paid him no heed.

Those words from Raios, "criminal who broke the law", continued echoing endlessly in his mind. Who cares about the law, I have to help Tiezé and Ronye even if I become a criminal. Eugeo indeed thought that, but he could hear a voice that didn't belong to him coming from somewhere.

The Axiom Church was absolute. The Taboo Index was absolute. Going against it was forbidden. Forbidden whoever it was.

"Gu... h...!!"

He gritted his teeth and raised his right foot in defiance of that voice. Those familiar leather boots—even the feet inside of them were heavy as though they had turned to lumps of lead. Taking fleeting glances at Eugeo in that state, Raios jeered in a whisper.

"That's right, just look from over there like a good little boy."

"U... ugh..."

He managed to step onto the floorboards with his unheeding right foot after all his efforts, but he couldn't lift himself up any further. Even while he tried, Raios' and Humbert's filthy hands were reaching out towards Tiezé and Ronye.

"——Senpai."

Hearing that feeble voice, Eugeo merely shifted his sight.

Upon doing so, Tiezé, who was being pressed down by Raios, turned only her head to the side and looked straight at Eugeo. Those cheeks, that were always red like apples, were a deep blue, perhaps due to the overwhelming fear but the gleam of a strong determination had returned to her eyes.

"Senpai, don't move. There's no need to worry about me... this is, a punishment I, should be taking."

Those broken, quivering words were firmly asserted by Tiezé and she returned back to looking straight up after a single nod. After glaring at Raios for an instant, she closed her eyes tightly. Beside her, Ronye was pressing her face into Tiezé's shoulder, but there were no screams coming from her anymore.

Facing the girls' determination, Raios drew his body back as if he was a little surprised—

Before a toxic smile showed itself on his face and he whispered.

"You got quite a tenacity for the young daughter of a sixth class noble family, don't you. Looks like we can really enjoy seeing how much they can hold out, huh, Humbert."

"Then shall we have a competition to see which cries out first, Raios-dono?"

The faces of those two, from which lines that didn't contain a shred of the pride of nobles came out, were so full of arousal and lust that they practically gleamed.

It was a somewhat familiar expression. While trying his best to get his unmoving foot forward, Eugeo thought with his partially numb mind. That was, right, the face on those goblins he had seen in that northern cave two years ago. They were exactly like those residents of the land of darkness that he and Kirito had chopped up with machetes.



Raios and Humbert reached out their hands towards Tiezé's and Ronye's faces at the same time and crept their fingertips across their foreheads and cheeks as if to stir up their fear and shame further. The only reason why they deftly avoided the lips was due to the restriction against direct contact on the lips before taking the vows of marriage. However—while establishing that as a taboo, what sort of law was one that allowed a girl to be defiled through brute force before marriage? What significance does a law like that have in its existence?

Twitch.

Suddenly, a sharp pain ran, deep within his right eye. That strange pain that occurred sometimes, when he bore doubts about the law and church.

Normally, he would automatically stop his thoughts whenever he felt this pain. But now, just this one time, Eugeo continued thinking while cowering unsightly on the floor.

Each and every law or taboo should exist for the sake of allowing all of those living in the Human World to pass their days in happiness. You must not steal. You must not hurt. And, you must not defy the Axiom Church. It was when all people followed that, that the world would maintain its peace.

However, if that was so, why were all of those laws full of «prohibitions»? That countless number of prohibition clauses listed down, extending over hundreds of pages, wasn't needed; wouldn't this be all that had to be written? Everyone should appreciate, pay their respects and possess a benevolent heart towards everyone else. If only that single sentence was written down in the Taboo Index, something like Raios and Humbert luring Tiezé and Ronye into a trap and toying with them wouldn't happen.

In other words, it was impossible. Even through the authority of the Church, it was not possible for all of mankind to hold only virtues. After all... after all...

Humans were existences that held both good and evil from the start.

The Taboo Index held back no more than a mere, single portion of human evil. That was why Raios and Humbert could stain those innocent girls by slipping through the coarse stitches of the law, no, in a sense, they were doing so while in accordance with the law. And, Eugeo already held no such authority that could obstruct that. Now, at this very moment, the law was permitting Raios' actions and prohibiting Eugeo's.

As if they had already forgotten about Eugeo's existence, the upper class nobles were looking over the girls' bodies with blazing bright eyes as they pulled them up. Exposing the front of their long garments, they hung over those two to perform that final deed at last.

The moment they felt the males approaching, Tiezé's and Ronye's faces distorted with several times the dread and disgust they had felt until then. They flung their heads left and right furiously like they were imploring, but Raios and Humbert slowly, slowly brought their bodies closer as if they were enjoying that act itself.

Finally, a thin voice escaped from Ronye's voice once again.

"N-No... No... No.....!"

Tiezé likely reached her limit with her close friend's crying voice. Large drops of tears and a scream overflowed from her at the same time.

"No... save us... save us, Eugeo-senpai! Eugeo-senpai—!"

A law that dealt a punishment this harsh to Tiezé and Ronye who mustered their courage to act for their friend, Frenica.

A law that did not stop the plan to lure the girls into a trap thought up by Raio and Humbert who were getting rid of their chastity at this very moment.

If following such a law would be considered good.

"I....."

Eugeo put his all into lifting up his body which felt heavy as though everything from his feet to his head had turned to lead, and reached his right hand out to the hilt of the Blue Rose Sword gripped by his left hand. His right eye had gone past pain and became a scorching hot mass before he knew it, painting his vision red, but he ignored it and tightly grasped the hilt with force.

The instant Eugeo draws the sword with its sharp steel blade, he would probably lose all that he had achieved in this academy. His position as the fifth elite swordsman-in-training, his place in the academy, even his goal to participate in the Swordsmanship Tournament as the academy's representative swordsman.

But if he merely looks on at Raio's actions at this very moment here, he would definitely lose something important. The pride of a swordsman... no, his own heart itself.

When they were enjoying themselves in the forest the day before yesterday, Kirito said this. That there were things that must be done even if prohibited by the law. Something more important than the law, the taboo, the Axiom Church.

He had finally understood after this long. Why Alice had ended up touching the ground in the land of darkness eight years ago.

There was no mistake that Alice was trying to help the Darkness Knight who was on the verge of death after getting pierced through the chest by the integrity knight at that time. For what was inside of herself: that important something.

And now, Eugeo's turn was here. What exactly that important something was, wasn't what he could put into words—though to many people living in the Human World, that might just be «evil».

"But..... !!"

With a wordless shout, Eugeo drew the Blue Rose Sword from its scabbard.

However.

Clank; as if the sword and its scabbard, no, his entire arm was buried in ice, the motion of his right hand suddenly froze. At the same time, a tremendous, intense pain penetrated the core of his head from his right eye. Sparks scattered across his vision dyed bright red, his consciousness leapt away.

.....What... is this.

.....No, this is..... the same, as that time.

Eight years ago. The time he tried to help Alice who was being taken away by the integrity knight in the plaza before the church in Rulid; it was exactly the same.

With the sword still drawn out a mere few millicen, Eugeo couldn't move. His voice couldn't come out either.

As if his two legs had grown roots spreading deep into the ground, he couldn't even make the slightest motion.

Raio and Humbert turned to look at him, perhaps having noticed the abnormality, and made broad sneers at Eugeo's unsightly, frozen state, still gripping onto his sword.

Slowing down their pace further, they moved their waists closer to Tiezé and Ronye shouting away in their crying voices, as if they were showing off.

In front of them, Eugeo saw a strange mark.

It was in the middle of his vision dyed in pale red. Shining the color of blood, multiple sacred letters lined up into a circle, rotating towards the right. It should be read as [SYSTEM ALERT:CODE871], but he did not understand it at all.

However, Eugeo's instincts told him. This was some sort of «seal». A seal applied deep within his right eye hindering his movements and enforcing his compliance to the law that time eight years back, and now as well. Due to this, he couldn't do anything aside from looking on as Alice was taken away.

"U... gu... oo...!"

Holding onto his vanishing consciousness with all he had, Eugeo stared at the deep crimson seal. And, on its other side, Raios and Humbert who were truly going to penetrate the girls' bodies.

Unforgivable. Definitely unforgivable. Turning the resentment he held for those two into strength, he moved his right arm. Inside the scabbard, the blade slid through bit by bit. The sacred letters in his sight steadily enlarged in proportion to that, with their rotation rate speeding up as well.

"N-Noooo——! Senpai——!!"

Tiezé shouted-

"U... oooaaa——!!"

And Eugeo screamed as well; that was when it happened.

With explosions of silver light at his right eye, the eyeball itself popped out from inside with a splattering sensation.

His vision degenerated to half of what it had been, but Eugeo still ignored it and savagely slid the Blue Rose Sword out of its scabbard. Before it was completely drawn, the blade already carried a blue radiance.

Aincrad-style secret move, Horizontal.

Perhaps perceiving the single hit that resembled thunder at the edge of his vision, Raios barely dodged below it. His flowing blonde hair touched its edge and scattered away.

However, Humbert was deeper inside and it was too late before he noticed Eugeo's movement. The moment he stopped his body that was on the verge of penetrating Ronye and sluggishly turned towards the left, his two eyes opened up widely.

"Eek....."

With that short shriek, the Blue Rose Sword hit near the elbow on his left arm that he had instinctively put up as if the sword were attracted to it.

There was no substantial resistance. However, Humbert's left arm was sliced into two halves and flew into the air as it spun about, falling onto the extravagant carpet.

No one made any sign of either moving or talking for a while. With his sword swung straight ahead all the way, Eugeo felt the pain that still remained where his right eye should not exist anymore.

Eventually—

A large amount of blood spouted out from the severed portion of Humbert's left arm that was raised up high with a spraying sound. Most of it fell onto the lustrous sheets, but one bit of it rained onto the left of Eugeo's body, creating black specks on his indigo blue uniform.

"No... aah... aaaaah——!?"

Following that, a shrill scream surged out from Humbert's throat. His eyes and mouth opened widely, his sight was fixed onto the blood flowing profusely out from his own arm.

"M.. my... my arm's...! Blood... so much blood...!! My Life... my Life is droppingggg!!"

That was when he finally grasped the severed part with his right hand, but the blood didn't stop with merely that. While the red fluid spilled onto the sheets in drops, he slid up towards Raio's at his immediate left.

"Ra-Raios-dono! Sacred arts! No, normal arts won't make it anymore... please, please share your Life with me...!!"

The bloodstained right hand reached out as though it wanted to cling onto Raio's—but he smoothly slipped away and got off the bed. It appeared Tiezé and Ronye were still in a daze over what had happened, as they lay on the sheets with a blank expression.

"Raio's-dono, your Lifeee!"

Raios looked towards Humbert, still shouting away, with eyes containing both surprise and apathy and spoke.

"...Stop that commotion, Humbert. You won't lose all of your Life with just a single arm falling off... or so I read in some book. Wrap it up in those silk strings and stop the flow of blood."

"N-No way..."

"Rather—did you see, Humbert?"

Taking his sight away from Humbert who was coiling two ropes, used to bind Ronye's and Tiezé's legs, onto the wound with a frantic look, Raio's looked down at Eugeo who was crouching, having completed the swing of his sword. The tip of his tongue licked over those much crooked lips countless times.

"What cut and blew away your arm was that bumpkin's sword. Magnificent... this is... the first time I've seen someone commit a taboo. I was expecting nothing more than an act of disrespect, but... to think he would violate the Taboo Index of all things!! This is truly magnificent!!"

Turning around with his front still exposed, Raio's walked up to the wall opposite of the bed. He withdrew a large long sword from a scabbard of red leather hung from there.

"The authority to judge was to be used only on lower class nobles and those who live in my domain, but... that restriction does not matter against someone who has committed such a grave taboo!"

While shouting with a voice that seemed even more excited than earlier, when he was assaulting Tiezé, the sword scraped as it was drawn from its scabbard. He brandished the silver blade that shone like a mirror high above his head with his right hand.

Outside the window, a noticeably fervid peal of thunder roared. The violet light glanced off the blade, getting into Eugeo's left eye. Raio's Antinous will judge Eugeo with that sword... in other words, he clearly intended to murder him. However, Eugeo made no movement. Even though he had violated the Taboo Index and had his right eye blown away by an unknown seal, the shock from the act of

slicing Humbert with his sword was too much for him and he couldn't hold his sword properly, or even make the slightest motion at all.

"Kuh, kukuku... What a pity, Swordsman-in-training Eugeo-dono. And I was looking forward to crossing swords with you in the official match next month too. I certainly didn't think I would be saying farewell to you in this manner."

Speaking in a voice mixed with insane joy, Raios took one step, two steps closer.

Eugeo looked up at the sword held high above through his misty left eye.

I can't die here; even as that thought ran through his mind, he heard a defeated voice as well; I'll die if I don't move. The dream of becoming an integrity knight and going to meet Alice would disappear forever. His beloved sword would take in the blood of humans and Eugeo would become a villainous criminal. But still, he was able to help Tiezé and Ronye in the end at least. Raios and Humbert shouldn't be assaulting those girls any further. Hence—even within this terrible crime he had committed, there was a fragment of relief.

"Kuh, kuku... It's the first time taking off a human's neck with a real sword, even for me. No, even my father or uncle shouldn't have done it. With this, I'll get even stronger... much more than even that aloof heir of the Levanteinn family."

Raios' sword and face glowed white once more and the roar of a crack of thunder followed that. Even Humbert, hugging onto his left arm, opened his eyes wide as though he forgot the pain of his wound for the moment while Tiezé, still bound on the bed, tried her all to call something out.

Eugeo returned a small smile to the novice trainee who had worked hard serving him as his valet, though it was for merely a single month, and bowed down his head.

"Swordsman-in-training Eugeo; no, Criminal Eugeo!! This eldest son of a third class noble family, Raios Antinous, will now execute thou through the nobles' judgement authority!! Offer all of your Life to God... and atone for your crime!!"

Raios Antinous shouted out loud and his sword followed as it growled—

Clink! He heard the noise of a heavy collision. The blade did not come for his head no matter how long he waited. Eugeo slowly raised his head, and then, he saw.

Below Raios' sword, swung half the way downwards, was another... long sword with a jet-black blade stopping its advance. The sleeve that covered the arm extended fully from behind too, was black. The hair drenched in rain of the intruder likewise—was black.

"Kiri... to....."

Upon Eugeo saying his name, his partner, who should have gone to the novice trainees' dormitory to look for Tiezé and Ronye, gave a faint nod while moving only his lips to whisper "Sorry". Shifting his sight back to the front, he spoke in a solemn voice.

"Take away your sword, Raios. I won't let you hurt Eugeo."

With that, Raios' mouth warped in animosity for a moment, but returned to a smile all at once and answered.

"So you've finally arrived, Swordsman-in-training Kirito. However... you're a little too late! That bumpkin over there is no longer a student of this academy, or even a subject of this empire for that matter. He's a heinous criminal who disobeyed the Taboo Index! Hence, I—Raios Antinous, the eldest son of a third class noble family and the head elite swordsman-in-training, have the authority to judge

over that crime. Back off and look on from there... as this criminal's head falls like a flower of the past!!"

At Raios' long-winded speech, Kirito responded with words much shorter, but held several times more weight.

"Like I care about taboos or the nobles' authority to judge."

Without any attempts to wipe off the drops of rain trickling down his hair, he glared at Raios with shining eyes set aflame.

"Eugeo's my best friend. And you're a piece of garbage worse than even the goblins from the land of darkness."

Upon hearing that, Raios' face was first dyed in fright, then hatred, before finally filled with a sadistic joy.

"Dear me. —Oh my, this is such a surprise! To think the fellow bumpkins from the outskirts would commit the crime of high treason, hand in hand! With this, I will be able to deal with both of you all together. This is such a fortunate day... this must truly be the guidance of Stacia!!"

Pulling back the crossed sword swiftly, he got back into the upper-level posture. But this time, he was holding on to the lengthy grip with both hands. He halved his stance with his sloppy long garment fluttering, lowering his waist, and the blade shone in a red mixed with blackish tinges. High Norkia-style secret move, «Heavenly Mountain Rending Wave».

The instant he saw that stance, Eugeo instinctively tried to get up.

Kirito dueled the previous head swordsman-in-training, Uolo Levanteinn, two and a half months ago and destroyed his Heavenly Mountain Rending Wave with the Aincrad-style four-hit consecutive skill, «Vertical Square». However, the ominous spirit being let out by Raios' secret move far exceeded Uolo's. It was likely that he could hardly hope to match Uolo in terms of skill, but his «pride as a noble» had swelled to its utmost limit, bestowing power upon his sword.

It'll be dangerous by yourself even if it's you, Kirito; Eugeo tried his best to rouse his body, but he could gather no power in his legs at all.

But his partner then gently grasped Eugeo's right shoulder with his left hand. "It's alright", Kirito deeply whispered and made Eugeo fall back to the left wall, before gripping onto the handle of the black sword with both hands like Raios.

His consciousness was half covered in haze, but still, Eugeo was startled and opened his left eye. The Aincrad-style should have been identical to the Zakkaria-style in how most of the skills were for single wield. Especially for the secret moves, of which none could be activated with a two-handed weapon. In the first place, the grips for Kirito's black sword and Eugeo's Blue Rose Blue were much too short for both hands to hold—

".....!!"

Just as he thought so, Eugeo was rammed by an even greater shock and swallowed his breath.

While letting out a repetitive clinking sound, the black sword's grip that Kirito held onto stretched longer, even if it was just a little. No, it wasn't merely the grip. The blade itself was growing in both width and length as well. It wasn't at the level of Raios' large sword, but it was already longer than the Blue Rose Sword by five or six cen now.

Kirito held the black sword that had increased in size with his two hands at the right of his waist. The sword made the air tremble as it gleamed green like jade. That skill was not from the Aincrad-style. He

had seen it countless times in the official matches of the previous year—the Serlut-style secret move, «Whirling Current».

"Kuh, kufufu... that sham of a skill made in desperation, huh! I'll crush some substitute like that with my secret move!!"

"Come, Raios! I'll pay back everything I owe you!!"

Both of their fighting spirit howled and painted the bedroom, which couldn't be said to be very wide, red and green.

Humbert who was cowering on the floor and now upon the bed, Tiezé and Ronye who were motionlessly glued to each other, and Eugeo who propped himself up on one knee by the wall; all of them stared at the two swordsmen facing off.

If it wasn't for today, it wouldn't be odd to see these elite swordsmen-in-training in the finals of the official match the coming month—they moved at the same time, with the next crack of thunder.

"Keaaaaaa!!!"

Along with that shrill war cry, Raios swung his sword straight down.

"Seyaa!!!"

With that short scream, Kirito slashed diagonally upwards with his sword.

The two swords clashed as the red and green grappled with each other, the resulting impact made the floorboards tremor while the glass windows cracked and broke towards the outside. As he stared at the black and silver blades struggling where they collided, Eugeo finally understood why Kirito did not use the Aincrad-style.

Single wield skills, that fall behind in pressure even if they excel in speed, could not defend against the two-handed skills of the High Norkia-style in a single strike. The skill would have to connect two or three hits while jumping back and warding off the force at the time of the collision, but that would not be possible in this bedroom, far narrower than the practice arena. It would likely be different if it was the living room next door at least, but Kirito could only fight here to protect Eugeo who couldn't move from Raios' depraved blade. That was why Kirito did not use the Aincrad-style, but let out Whirling Current from the two-handed skills of the Serlut-style instead.

"Ki... Kirito...!!!"

At the same time that Eugeo forced his partner's name out of his dry, rough throat, Kirito's left shoulder slumped down. While releasing a creaking, grating noise, the black sword was driven back. Raios' eyes and mouth were upturned until they could be raised no more and a completely high-pitched scream gushed out of him.

"How's that... how's that!! You load of bastards without family names!! There is no way this Raios Antinous-sama could be defeated!! Even if you could make dead flowers bloom again with some suspicious technique, those deceptions will not work on my sworddddd—!!!"

Raios' fighting spirit had turned from red to dusky black unnoticed and that covered not only the blade, but his body as well, starting from his arm, ruffling his long garment and blonde hair violently. Kirito's sword was pushed back close to where it had started and its emerald spirit swayed unsteadily.

"Kiri....."

When he was about to call out his partner's name again, Eugeo suddenly noticed.

Whirling Current pushed back by the Heavenly Mountain Rending Wave. He had seen this exact same scene a short time ago.

That was during the finals of the last official match for the previous elite swordsmen-in-training, in the third month of this year. Sortiliena-senpai was pushed onto one knee by the mighty sword of the head, Uolo, just like how Kirito was right now... but this was when——

"U... ooo!!"

Kirito roared once again. A vivid jade radiance welled out from the black sword, dying the room in its color. **The second hit of a single-hit secret move.** The bold move from Liena-senpai that had defeated Uolo at the end of ends.

Normally, the various secret moves would stop if their forms were broken. However, only in the situation that it were to return on the proper trajectory of its slash, could it be held on for much longer. Having noticed that in the duel between Kirito and Uolo, Liena-senpai mastered it in a mere half month. The second hit of the Serlut-style secret move, Whirling Current.

Kirito was Liena-senpai's valet, but as she graduated right after the official match, he should not have had the time to learn this skill directly from her. In other words, Kirito must have made his master's skill his own after seeing it once as well.

This truly was how the relationship between the swordsman-in-training and the valet trainee should be.

And this truly was the essence behind the sword.

Tears flowed from Eugeo's left eye. These were the tears from being overly touched by a magnificently performed skill and the regret of not having studied the sword much more. In the middle of his blurred vision the Whirling Current brought out once again by Kirito split Raios' sword into perfect halves——

The two arms of the head elite swordsman-in-training were severed and blown away a little before where the wrists were.

Thrown away backwards and landing on his rear on the carpet, Raios stared at the bottom half of his own long sword and the two hands that held its grip, rolling a short distance away, with a curious look.

Before long, he turned his sight to his own two arms. The white arms extended from the bright red long garment were cleanly severed before the elbows. A large amount of fresh blood suddenly gushed out from the smooth cuts, dying Raios' chest and stomach in the same red as his long garment.



"N... N... Noooooooooo——!!"

With his two eyes and mouth opened as wide as they could, Raios screamed in a shrill voice.

"M... my arm!! My arms'ss!! Blood, there's blood!!"

It seems Raios, who told Humbert to "stop his commotion and stop the flow of blood" when his left arm was sliced off by Eugeo, could not keep his calm when he suffered the same fate. His widely opened eyes fluctuated from place to place as he looked around himself, the moment he spotted Humbert cowering a short distance away, he sidled up to him on his knees.

"Humbeeeeert!! Blood!! Stop my blood!! Untie your strings and tie my wound!!"

It appeared that even Humbert, who usually acted as though he was Raios' follower, could not obey that order as expected. While hugging onto his own left arm wrapped up in the red silk strings, he kept shaking his head bit by bit.

"N-No! I-If this is untied, my Life will drop!!"

"What did you say?! Humbe—rt, you want my Life to....."

However, Raios got his voice cut off there.

The two strands of silk string, originally used to bind Tiezé and Ronye, were now being used to stop the flow of blood from Humbert's left arm. Both of those strings must be used if the blood from Raios' two arms were to be stopped. However, with the wound itself yet to be healed, blood would flow again if the strings were untied from Humbert and his Life would begin to drop once more. Reducing another's Life without a justifiable reason or agreement—that was a clear violation of the Taboo Index.

"But... my blood's... Humbert, you... taboo... however... my Life....."

Raios recited incoherent words in a hysterical voice. His line of sight restlessly switched from the blood still flowing from his own wounds and the silk strings wrapped around Humbert's wound.

Raios Antinous, the successor to a third class noble family, was now forced into a situation where he had to choose between «his own life» and «the Taboo Index». To the gigantic mass of pride that he was, his own life must be countless times more important. However, at the same time, he could not go against the absolute law, the Taboo Index. If he were to do that, he would become a heinous criminal, just like Eugeo who he himself had tried to decapitate.

"Aaaah... taboo... life... bloodd... taboooooo....."

The one who approached Raios, still continuing his screams, was Kirito.

Coming to a stop two mel before him, he first reached out to Tiezé and Ronye who were huddling against each other atop the bed with his hands. He touched their shoulders as if to reassure them and after a nod, he untied the string binding Ronye's upper body. He must have planned to stop Raios' blood with that, but the knot wasn't easily untied. Even while that happened, the frenzy that the head swordsman-in-training was in amplified in intensity.

"Blood... taboo... li... ta... rif... da.....!"

It was when Raios threw his entire body backwards as incomprehensible words leaked out from him that Kirito took a step towards him with the string he had finally gotten untied—that was when it happened.

"Life, daboo, rife, daboo, ri, r-r-ririri-"

Raios' voice echoed with a peculiar tinge. It felt more like the cry of a beast rather than human speech, or the strange noise emitted by a tool that was already broken.

"R-R-Ri, ri, rai, ria, riariaria, riariariaria————"

Abruptly, the noise ceased.

Raios Antinous fell straight backwards and landed with a thump. Blood remained flowing from the wounds on his two arms, so that would mean that he should still have Life remaining, but Eugeo intuitively understood Raio was no longer living.

Even Kirito was frozen with a facial expression showing fright as expected, while both Tiezé and Ronye, who were trying to untie the ropes that bound them, opened their eyes wide—while that happened, Humbert timidly approached Raio and looked into his thrown back face.

"E-Eek!!"

A scream filled with fear immediately welled out of him.

"Ra-Ra-Raios-dono's... h-h-he's dead...! Y-Y-You... you killed him, you killed him!! Murderer... y-you monster... monster...!!"

Crawling away from Kirito and getting up with both knees trembling, he fell out into the living room. It seems he rushed out into the corridor like that, as the footsteps and screams vanished towards the staircase.

Eugeo already had no idea of what would happen and what he should be doing from now on. Too much had happened in succession and he even thought of the right eye that had popped as a trivial issue.

For the time being, he returned the Blue Rose Sword still held in his right hand back to its scabbard and somehow got on his feet.

He first exchanged glances with Kirito and after a single, silent nod, he took one, two steps towards Tiezé who still sat on the bed.

But he then came to a standstill. Thinking about it, Eugeo was now a criminal who had gone against the Taboo Index and sliced apart Humbert's arm. To a girl who had lived for merely sixteen years, he must be the same as Raio... or perhaps, his existence might even be several times as abominable.

Not even able to look at Tiezé's face any longer, Eugeo lowered his own and tried to draw back.

But before he could do so, a small figure flew into his chest with a thump.

The messed up red hair strongly pushed against Eugeo's uniform. Simultaneously, a harsh voice struck his earlobes.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry, Eugeo-senpai... It's... it's because of me that...!"

Eugeo reacted by vehemently shaking his head, then interrupted Tiezé's speech.

"That's not it, it's not your fault, Tiezé. I... I didn't think through it enough. You aren't at fault for any of it, Tiezé."

"B-But... but...!"

"It's fine, both you and Ronye ended up unharmed. I have to apologize too... sorry for making you go through all those scary things."

When he said that and awkwardly stroked the autumn-colored hair, Tiezé begun to sob even harder. Ronye was pushing her face into Kirito's chest while crying as well, at his side. Moving his line of sight upwards, his partner gave a slight nod when their eyes met.

It happened when Eugeo tried to nod in return. Kirito's face twitched into a grimace as though someone pulled onto his hair. His eyes darted left and right and looked up at the ceiling next.

Those black eyes suddenly opened wide, so Eugeo traced their sight. And—he saw **that**.

Near the northeast corner on the bedroom's ceiling, something that looked like a violet panel was hovering. It greatly resembled the «Stacia Window», but was much larger, not to mention round. And from deep inside that, someone was looking down at the room... no, at Eugeo and the rest. It was unknown whether that someone was male or female, young or old. There were eyes on the pale skin, round and like glass marbles.

.....Somewhere in the past.

.....I have seen that person somewhere long ago in the past.

While Eugeo's intuition told him that, the white face opened its bottomless pit of a mouth. In that instant, Kirito who stood at his side whispered in an extremely soft voice.

"Don't let Tiezé and Ronye hear it!"

Eugeo instantaneously strongly embraced Tiezé's head with both arms while she was still sobbing. It happened then right after Kirito did the same, wrapping Ronye up.

"Singular unit detected. ID tracing..."

A mysterious voice emerged from the being on the opposite side of the purple panel, no, window. Verses for a sacred arts ceremony—he thought, but there were none of the vocabulary he had learnt from the lessons. The face remained silent for two, three seconds before-

"Coordinates fixed. Report complete."

It closed its mouth with those final words and vanished without a trace along with the window. It was a strange phenomenon, but Eugeo's mind was far too exhausted to feel surprise or fear. Leaving the explanations to Kirito, he gently let out the breath he held.

The storm outside the window had left unnoticed, leaving the ongoing sobs from Ronye and Tiezé to sound out alone. Eugeo firmly held on to his valet trainee's small frame while he lowered his sight from the ceiling towards the floor.

The corpse of Raios Antinous, who had died with his two arms that were severed from the elbow onwards and his back bent as far back as it could, was there.

Kirito was the one who had cut Raios, but Eugeo had sliced off Humbert's arm as well, so they were the same. He could recall Humbert's screams deep in his ears.

—Murderer. Monster.

Those were words that had appeared in the old tales his grandmother told and greatly frightened his brothers and himself when they were children. The demi-humans from the land of darkness held no laws or taboos to uphold and killed even those of their own race, his grandmother recited. Eugeo found it to be the truth by experiencing it first-hand in the underground cave in the mountain range at the edge two years ago.

...That's right, I'm already the same as those goblins. The human named Humbert Zizek... who was even my peer at this Sword Mastery Academy; that person was cut by me in my fit of anger.

In that case, to at least prove that I am different from those goblins, even if it's only by a little, shouldn't I judge my own self? Shouldn't I, having become a monster, not have the right to beg for forgiveness from Tiezé's body warmth like this...?

Eugeo's shoulder, while he tried to bear the torment by firmly closing the left eye he had left, was—
Tightly gripped by Kirito's hand which reached out from the side. A deep murmur came with it.

"You're human, Eugeo. Just like me... committing various mistakes, and still struggling to find the significance behind them... that's how humans are."

The moment he heard that, Eugeo felt a warm fluid spilling out from his own left eye. Thinking it might be bleeding like his right eye, he timidly lifted his eyelids, and the various golden fragments glistened in the light of the wall lamp.

What flowed was not blood but tears. They traced down his cheek and dripped onto Tiezé's hair one after another. After a short while, Tiezé nervously brought her face up and looked at Eugeo. Those red eyes wet with tears brought to mind a leaf on a tree in autumn, brimming with morning dew.

The girl who was still Eugeo's valet trainee at this very moment made a nearly indiscernible smile and upon retrieving a white handkerchief from her uniform's pocket, she gently touched Eugeo's cheek with that. Tiezé continued wiping the tears that flowed out over and over again, without end.

Part 5

".....It's a pity. Truly."

Saying so softly, Dormitory Supervisor Azurika followed up after a short pause to think.

"And I was sure the two of you would be the academy's representative swordsmen this year too."

"I was planning on that as well though."

He certainly couldn't emulate Kirito who went ahead and said that in this situation; on the contrary, his left eye gradually grew hotter, so Eugeo looked up in a fluster.

The 5th month's sky was cloudless, as though they were washed away by the storm last night. Many small birds were chirping in the branches of the trees sparkling in the verdant green of new sprouts. It would surely feel good to lie down on the lawn at the central plaza on a day like this—but Eugeo and Kirito would never have another chance to take an afternoon nap at this academy again.

The two spent the whole of last night on the other side of the iron door towering behind them—the underground discipline chamber of the Sword Mastery Academy's administrative building. The chamber was rather clean despite it being barely used since the start of the school and the beds were close to those of the novice trainees' dormitory, but as expected Eugeo was unable to get a wink of sleep.

Kirito was Kirito as always, trying hard the entire night to treat Eugeo's right eye that had popped with sacred arts, but regeneration of an organ was difficult when sealing the wound without a catalyst already took his all. In the first place, it was unclear why his right eye stopped working when it did not receive any external injuries. The sacred power in the surrounding atmosphere dried up as the ceremonies for various arts were tried and even Kirito, with his usual tenacity, could not help but to give up for the time being.

The night ended before long, the morning sun shone in the narrow window and the lock to the discipline chamber turned with the 9 AM bell. He thought it would be the empire's imperial guards here to escort them for sure, but the one standing beyond the door was surprisingly, Azurika-sensei from the novice trainees' dormitory—that was what had happened.

The female instructor, who could be thought to be in the latter part of her twenties, loosened the tension in her mouth just a little bit at Kirito's words, and turned to Eugeo. Those grey-blue eyes that brought to mind a cleanly polished blade and reminded Eugeo of Sister Azariya from Rulid Village always made him nervous, but he continued staring into those eyes without averting his eyes this particular time.

Dormitory Supervisor Azurika was about to say something, but then closed her mouth and next fetched an item from her coat's pocket. A small light green sphere. It resembled a glass ornament but wasn't one. It was the crystallized form of the sacred power harvested from the «four sacred flowers» cultivated in the academy's flowerbeds.

The dormitory supervisor broke the precious catalyst by pinching it between the fingertips of her left hand without hesitation. With a fleeting sound, glittering beads of light danced in the air. Without a moment's pause, she chanted the ceremony for the art with her right hand held at Eugeo's right eye.

"System call. Generate luminous element..."

It was at a recital speed far quicker than the instructors for sacred arts. Even while Eugeo and Kirito stood still dumbfounded, complex paragraphs of procedures were smoothly compiled together, and a warm light coalesced on the wound at Eugeo's right eye—

"Try opening your eye."

He heard that whisper at the end, so Eugeo timidly raised the right eyelid sealed for the past sixteen hours. Upon doing so, the right side of his vision returned as though it had never been gone, and a sigh of surprise and wonder escaped from him. Eugeo looked through the surroundings countless times before he gave a deep bow, finally having noticed.

"Th-Thank you very much, Azurika-sensei."

"It's fine. Rather than that... Swordsman-in-training Eugeo, and you too, Swordsman-in-training Kirito. Before I hand you over to your escort, I'll say this one thing."

Softly mentioning so, Dormitory Supervisor Azurika showed a rare sign of hesitation before placing her right hand on Kirito's shoulder and her left on Eugeo's shoulder.

"The both of you will likely be judged for the offence of disobeying the Taboo Index and harming the Life of another now. However, don't forget. That the Taboo Index... no, even the Axiom Church itself was made not by God, but by man."

"Eh... wh-what do you mean by..."

Eugeo questioned in reflex.

Even a child knew about how the God of Creation, Stacia, gave birth to the Human World, no matter how young. And that the Church which supervised the Human World too, was created by God as well.

"For now... that's all I'll say. But you'll definitely find out soon. About the truth behind this world."

That was when Dormitory Supervisor Azurika frowned and closed tightly, but only her right eye. Eugeo intuitively knew that she was enduring a sharp pain.

"...Swordsman-in-training Eugeo. You've broken a seal that I didn't. If that's the case, you should definitely be able to go where I couldn't... Trust in that sword and your friend."

She nodded and turned to face Kirito next.

"And you, Swordsman-in-training Kirito. About who you really are... even I couldn't understand in the end. However, something will definitely happen when you reach that tower. I'll be praying for light in your path from now on, from here. Always."

Her words became even more puzzling, but it seemed Kirito understood them. He nodded and covered up Dormitory Supervisor Azurika's hand, on his own left shoulder, and brought it to his chest.

"Thank you, sensei. I'll come and meet you again someday. We'll definitely have a chat then. About what you want to know, all of it."

Finishing what he had to say, he gently tapped the slender fingertip held between his two hands against his own mouth. Dormitory Supervisor Azurika blinked countless times in surprise and though it might have been a trick of the light, a little color seemed to have gone into her cheeks, before she gave a faint smile.

Kirito made a face like someone had pulled on his hair yet again in that instant, but the dormitory supervisor didn't seem to have noticed that. She slowly withdrew her right hand from Kirito's and took her hand off Eugeo's shoulder—

"Well then, let's go. Your escort is here."

The academy grounds usually filled with students bustling from classroom to classroom had turned quiet, without any sign of people around.

In exchange, Eugeo found something unexpected in the plaza before the large practice arena and widely opened his just-recovered eyes.

A gigantic living being was given a dazzling sheen under the light from Solus pouring down from the sunny skies. The metal armor equipped on its chest and head, and naturally, the triangular scales adorning its entire body as well, all gave off a silver gleam. It was obvious even without looking at its folded wings which towered like a couple of spires and the long tail that drew an arc to know that it was a flying dragon. Ridden by the guardians of law and order, the integrity knights, it was the greatest and thus, the strongest sacred beast in the Human World.

It didn't look like the rider was around. Without a trace of hesitation at the flying dragon that looked down at the three from above, Dormitory Supervisor Azurika guided Eugeo and Kirito to the practice arena and stopped in her tracks there.

She looked at the two in turn, gave a light nod and silently shifted aside. Dormitory Supervisor Azurika left for the novice trainees' dormitory with her long boots ringing out, the both of them took a deep bow towards her back. Raising their heads only after the sound of the footsteps were gone, they glanced at the flying dragon to check it out and turned back towards the large door leading to the practice arena.

".....If a flying dragon's around... our escort's an integrity knight... I believe?"

There were slight tremors in Eugeo's murmurs, but his partner made a hmph through his nose as he usually would and nonchalantly reached his hand out towards the closed door.

"Won't know until we see it."

Pushing it open the moment he said that, he stepped in with large strides. Eugeo steeled himself and chased behind.

The insides were dim, perhaps due to the closed skylight. The wooden-boarded practice arena and the surrounding spectator stands were naturally enough, devoid of students and instructors.

A piece of art was drawn on the white wall far in front of them with the creation myth, «The Three Goddesses who drove away the God of Darkness, Vector», as its theme. And, right in the middle of the vast practice arena was a single silhouette looking in the opposite direction, at the wall—

Eugeo had once seen an integrity knight from the Church up close. Of course, that was when the young Alice had been taken away. The integrity knight who had called himself «Deusolbert Synthesis Seven» had an immense body with a height close to two mel. However, the one standing in Eugeo's vision now was far smaller than that knight. That height might even be a little shorter than Eugeo if only that was taken into consideration.

The blue mantle clasped onto those two shoulders was embroidered with the Axiom Church's crest, a composite between a cross and a circle. However, what caught the eye beyond anything else, was that which flowed straight down over the mantle, that long golden hair. It was of a color far more deep and pure than Raio's, gleaming like molten gold even under the obscure lighting.

That figure made no movement, so Eugeo exchanged glances with Kirito and slowly begun to walk. Crossing straight, through the practice arena, they stopped around five mel from the small-framed person.

"...From the North Centoria Empire, Sword Mastery Academy, I am Elite Swordsman-in-training Eugeo."

When he managed to name himself without choking on his words, his partner continued without a moment's delay.

"Same here, I'm Kirito."

It was the type of scene where he would usually complain 'stop cutting corners and name yourself properly!' in his mind, but that thought didn't come to mind at all this time. It wasn't all due to his anxiety. As he looked at the blue mantle and golden hair fluttering in the gentle breeze blown in from the entrance, still open a mere few steps behind, a queer feeling begun to develop in his chest.

—Somewhere.

This blend, of blue and gold. It felt like, he had seen it, somewhere before...

The strangling distress turned into a shock that could practically stop his heart several seconds later.

"United Centoria City Region, integrity knight of the Axiom Church—I am Alice Synthesis Thirty."

The knight stated her name with her back still facing them. There was no mistaking that voice. It was a voice he had heard almost daily for close to ten years since he had gained awareness as a child.

And that name. The family name had an unfamiliar ring to it, but surely he heard her name right.
«Alice».

It couldn't be a mere coincidence. Eugeo took one, two sluggish steps forward and whispered incoherently.

"...Alice...? It's you...? You're... Alice.....?"

It seemed that Kirito quickly reached out with his hand from the left, but Eugeo slipped away from that and took another step closer. The golden hair and mantle were fluttering right before his own eyes, and a faint fragrance spread out. It was a gentle, nostalgic fragrance that brought to mind a flower garden that had received plentiful sunlight. A fragrance that always drifted about that blue apron dress his childhood friend wore.

"Alice...!"

Once more, and while calling out clearly this time, Eugeo tried to touch the integrity knight's right shoulder. After turning around, the knight would greet Eugeo with that impish, aloof and demure smile and—

That idea was crushed by a streaking flash of light.

The terrible impact assailed his right cheek and Eugeo was helplessly blown away, collapsing onto the practice arena's floorboards, back first.

"Eugeo!"

Kirito helped him up straight away, but even that didn't register in his consciousness as Eugeo opened his two eyes wide, dumbfounded.

Still facing them with her back even now, the knight had her right hand extended horizontally and now held a long sword before anyone had noticed. However, it wasn't a naked blade but was sheathed in a gilded scabbard. The knight had removed the scabbard from its sword belt and attacked Eugeo's cheek with its tip in that instant.

Lowering the sword in a smooth motion, the integrity knight spoke.

"...Speak and behave yourself with care. I have the authority to deprive the both of you of seventy percent of your Lives. The next time you try to touch me without my consent, that very hand will be sliced off."

Informing them so in that cool and clear like water thawed from ice, yet frigid and stern voice, the knight finally turned around.

".....Alice..."

Eugeo could not stop that name from escaping his mouth once again.

The integrity knight who carried that golden sword was once taken away from Rulid Village; Eugeo's childhood friend, Village Chief Gasupht's daughter and Selka's sister, Alice Schuberg—that grown-up figure couldn't be anyone but her.

Her outfit was obviously different from then. Her chest, shoulders and waist were covered in light armor with elegant engravings set in them, and her long skirt could even reach her feet. But there was no mistaking that face.

Glossy golden hair without creases. Pure white skin with a sense of innocence. And above all that, that indescribable deep blue within those two slightly upturned eyes, a color he had never seen on anyone except that girl, even after coming to central.

It was only the light that hovered in those eyes however, that differed from that of his memories. They had lost that radiance overflowing with curiosity she had when she still lived at Rulid Village, and Eugeo felt nothing but a bare cold gaze concentrated on him as he lay collapsed on the floor.

Those lips in the color of cherry blossoms moved and that lovely, yet cool-headed voice flowed out once again.

"Huh... I had planned to take off thirty percent of your Life, but it was only reduced by half of that. If you averted that with merely the judgement from your body, that would be proof of your appointment as an elite swordsman-in-training... or perhaps of one who had committed a heinous crime like murder, I suppose."

The way she spoke made it clear that she had read through Eugeo's «window» without even touching his hands, but he couldn't even think about its implications.

Eugeo didn't want to accept those words streaming into his ears by any means. There was no way that gentle Alice could say such things. No, before even considering that, Eugeo couldn't believe that Alice would show no reaction upon even seeing him, then inflict a merciless blow on his cheek and in the first place, stand before his very eyes as an integrity knight.



It was when he ignored the warning and tried to call out once more.

Kirito gave a short whisper near his ears.

"That knight's the «Alice» you were searching for, isn't she?"

His partner's voice was distinctively calm despite the circumstances and Eugeo managed to retrieve a mere bit of his composure. After forcing out a small nod, that whisper came again.

"...Obey her instructions for now. If we enter the Central Cathedral, even as criminals, we should be able to understand the situation a little more."

Enter—the Cathedral.

Eugeo finally noticed upon Kirito mentioning it. It was what he had wished for; although it wasn't by winning and proceeding through the Empire Swordsmanship Tournament and Four Empires Unity Tournament, then being appointed as an integrity knight, but instead by having committed a taboo, he still ended up closing in to his goal a year earlier than scheduled.

Entering the Central Cathedral and meeting with Alice. That was Eugeo's final goal.

The sequence was different and Eugeo didn't know the reason behind Alice acting like a different person as an integrity knight, but at the very least, he had achieved half of his objectives at the present moment. In that case, he should definitely find it if he entered the Cathedral. A way to return Alice to how she was.

Just as Eugeo managed to restore his composure, Knight Alice restored the sword in her right hand to the left of her waist as well. Her mantle fluttering, she started walking towards the large door.

"Stand, and follow me."

There was no option to go against her instructions any longer. Helped up by Kirito, Eugeo chased behind Alice in silence.

Upon exiting the practice arena, Alice headed straight towards the flying dragon on standby at the plaza and softly stroked its formidable muzzle with her right hand. Continuing on, she took out strange tools from the large cargo area created behind the saddle.

That, three thick leather belts joined together by iron chains—was a restraint device. It was exactly the same as the one that had bound the young Alice eight years ago.

Approaching with a restraint device in each of her two hands, Alice made Kirito and Eugeo stand up straight and informed them coldly. That voice was far quieter than Raio's shouts when he had tried to cut Eugeo, but it held a majestic effect as though it was a delegate for the voice of God.

"Elite Swordsman-in-training Eugeo. Elite Swordsman-in-training Kirito. The both of you will be arrested, taken into custody, brought to trial, then executed at a later date."

The restraint devices were coiled around the frozen bodies of the two by Alice's hands. Both their arms, chest and waist were tightly bound by the leather belts, completely losing their ability to move all at once.

Grabbing the chains extending from the pair's backs and returning to the side of the flying dragon, Alice fixed them onto the clasps on the armor that covered the sacred beast's two sturdy legs, one at a time. Thus, Kirito was then attached to the dragon's right leg and the left for Eugeo.

Eight years ago, Integrity Knight Deusolbert had fastened the young Alice onto the dragon's leg in the same manner and flown away. However, even a flying dragon takes an entire day to get from Rulid to

Central Centoria. How harsh and frightening that experience must have been for a child, merely eleven of age, was beyond imagination if she were suspended for that entire duration.

And that Alice had for some reason, had become an integrity knight and now tied Eugeo to the dragon as was done to her eight years ago. He couldn't help but recognize the lack of hesitation in her actions. The knight, Alice, before his eyes was Alice Schuberg, while a different person at that same time. Some great power had changed the girl.

As Kirito had said, they might find out that secret if they were to go to the Central Cathedral. However—the question was whether Alice would return to how she was before.

No, before thinking about that. What if the same thing happened to himself? What if he forgets everything and becomes a different self? The time he lived at Rulid, the long journey to the central... and even the events at this Sword Mastery Academy; what if he forgets all of it.....?

It happened then, when Eugeo was assailed by fear and uneasiness.

Two sets of soft footsteps came from behind and Eugeo turned to Kirito as the latter did the same.

The ones approaching with staggering but earnest steps were novice trainees wearing grey uniforms. The one with long red hair, Tiezé Shtolienen. The one with short dark brown hair was Ronye Arabel.

The reason for their faltering gait was due to the burdens the two of them carried with both hands. Tiezé's was a long sword kept in a scabbard of white leather. Ronye's was a long sword in a scabbard of black leather. There was no room for mistake. It was what they had left behind in Raios' room last night, Eugeo's Blue Rose Sword and Kirito's black sword.

Tiezé's and Ronye's palms were worn out and bloody as they reverently held the scabbards. Naturally. Those two swords were heavy to the point that even their owners, Eugeo and Kirito, could not wield them without giving it their all.

"Tiezé..."

"Ronye!"

Eugeo and Kirito called out their names simultaneously and the girls showed a small smile while enduring the pain. But then, Integrity Knight Alice left the flying dragon and looked at Tiezé and Ronye. Recalling the severe blow that numbed his right cheek even now, Eugeo instantly shouted.

"No, Tiezé, don't come!"

However, the two novice trainees did not cease their steps. As drops of blood trickled onto the stone paved plaza, they walked through the final ten mel and slumped onto their knees before Alice.

They let out rough breaths for a while, but Tiezé was the first to firmly raise her head and speak.

"Kn-Knight-sama... please!"

Next, Ronye continued in a trembling voice.

"Grant us the permission to return our seniors their swords, please...!"

Alice looked down at the girls in silence, but gave a small nod before long.

"Fine. However, I can't have criminals wearing swords. I will hold onto these. If you wish to speak to them, I'll permit you to do so for one minute."

First grasping the Blue Rose Sword with her right hand and the black sword with her left next, she effortlessly lifted them from Ronye's and Tiezé's hands. Returning to the flying dragon's side with

movements like she felt no weight at all, she stored the two swords in the cargo area the restraint devices were in.

Tiezé and Ronye held their hurt, scraped hands together at their chests and showed relieved smiles as though they didn't feel the pain at all. Wavering as they stood up, Tiezé and Ronye approached Eugeo and Kirito respectively.

".....Eugeo-senpai..."

Tiezé who stood still before Eugeo's eyes widely opened her own, evidence of having wept still within them, and looked at him.

After nearly averting his eyes by instinct, Eugeo tried his all and received Tiezé's gaze.

Eugeo had sliced away Humbert's arm before the eyes of Tiezé and Ronye last night. With his arms cut off as well, bizarre screams had escaped from Raio as he passed away. There was no mistake that tragedy was a huge blow to Tiezé and Ronye, despite them not getting any actual injuries.

Eugeo shouldn't be a reliable mentor to Tiezé now, but a miscreant who broke the Taboo Index. A heinous villain with his freedom stolen by unsparing restraint devices, tied up by chains.

Then.

Large drops of tears welled out from Tiezé's autumn-colored pupils and flowed down her cheeks.

"Eugeo-senpai... I'm sorry... it's... it's my fault that..."

Holding her hands tightly together, she continued as though she was squeezing her frail voice out.

"...I'm sorry... because... of that foolish thing... I did..."

"No... that's not it."

Caught off guard, Eugeo shook his head endlessly.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Tiezé... you did the right thing for your friend. ...It's entirely my fault that things ended up like this. There's nothing you have to apologize for, Tiezé."

Upon hearing that, Tiezé looked straight into Eugeo's eyes as though she could see through the depths of his soul and forced a smile onto her lips with all her might.

"This time..."

The young valet trainee spoke in a quavering but decisive tone.

"This time, it will be my turn to save Eugeo-senpai. I... I'll do my best and definitely become an integrity knight, and go save senpai... so please wait for me. I'll definitely... definitely..."

Sobs swallowed the rest of her words. Eugeo could do naught but nod over and over again.

Having finished her short conversation on the other side of the flying dragon as well, Ronye put the bundle in her hand into Kirito's bound hands and spoke in a voice mixed with tears.

"Erm... this is a bento. Please eat it if you get hungry..."

The words from Kirito in return were drowned by the sound of the flapping wings of the flying dragon, reverberating far.

"It's time. Get away."

Knight Alice had mounted the flying dragon's saddle without anyone noticing. A snap sounded out from the bridle and the dragon roused its gigantic frame. Eugeo's body hovered slightly in the air, pulled by the chains.

With their unceasing tears flowing out, Tiezé and Ronye backed off several steps. The silver wings beat out with strength and the wind they created ruffled the girls' hair.

Even as the flying dragon started its approach run and made the earth tremor, those two chased behind as fast as they could, but their feet soon tangled and their hands fell onto the stone paving. Right after that, it used noticeably more intensity to kick off the ground with its sturdy legs, and its huge body gently floated into the air.

As the flying dragon whirled up, drawing spirals in the skies, Tiezé and Ronye below became ever smaller. Their figures soon vanished into the grey of the stone paving, and the entire view of the North Centoria Empire Sword Mastery Academy appeared far off in the distance in an instant—

The flying dragon, with an integrity knight on its back and criminals hanging off its two legs, aligned itself towards the enormous tower that rose from the exact middle of central, the Axiom Church's Central Cathedral, and soared off in a straight line.

Interlude III

In the middle of the huge oceanic research mothership, «Ocean Turtle», stabbed a hollow pillar with a diameter of twenty meters and a height of a hundred.

That titanium alloy round pillar, termed the main shaft, was supporting every floor of the ship, while also serving its duty of protecting the heart of the ship via encasement as a pressure bulkhead. Aside from the ship's control and power systems, machinery developed by the mysterious research organization, «Rath», were stored within it as well.

To be specific, there were four ominous fulldive machines that could read and write a person's soul, the «Soul TransLators (STL)». Also, there was the single central arithmetic unit they were connected to, the «Light Cube Cluster».

The enormous cluster was installed near the middle of the shaft, and below it were the STL number 2 and number 3 located at the «lower shaft». Number 4 and number 5 were placed on the «upper shaft» on the top side. STL prototype number 1 was not on this ship, but at a research branch of Rath at Roppongi, Minato-ku, quite a distance from here.

The one that Kirito—Kirigaya Kazuto, stuck in his sustained coma, was being connected to for treatment on his damaged neural network was STL number 4 on the top side of the shaft. Hence, getting all the way there would require one to enter the shaft from below and move upwards via the stairs or elevator.

6th July 2026, Monday, 7:30 AM.

Asuna—Yuuki Asuna adjusted the collar of the summer knit she wore atop her t-shirt as she ascended the gloomy spiral staircase.

The clanging echoes of her hard footsteps upon the anti-rust coated metal steps under the orange emergency LED lights brought forth memories. Asuna did not know exactly how many times had she gone up stairs resembling these in a steel castle floating in the infinite skies, far, far away from this place. Those spiral staircases connecting the rooms of boss monsters that protected each floor with the next in the Floating Castle Aincrad—

The leader of the «Knights of the Blood», Heathcliff, would walk before her most of the time with the guild members excited over the boss fight's victory following behind, but there were exceptions. That black-clad solo player had always walked at her side before she joined the KoB, at the initial phase of clearing the death game.

Making Asuna mad with those bad jokes he told in that indifferent attitude that expelled fatigue from the fierce battles, teaching her information about the next floor... and the countless times he pulled Asuna's hand when she was exhausted from the endless fights too.

".....Kirito-kun."

As the clanging footsteps rang out from the steel steps, Yuuki Asuna softly called out the name of the one she loved.

Of course, there was no reply.

She forced the despair and loneliness that threatened to overflow back down the depths of her chest. Unlike the day before yesterday, Kazuto was no longer missing. He was awaiting Asuna in that small room at the top end of the stairs. Even without exchanging words—even without holding each other's hands, the time for him to wake was approaching little by little. The nurse, Aki Natsuki, did say that at

the current rate, the treatment through the STL would regenerate his cranial nerves network within a day or two, likely approaching a stage where he would regain his consciousness.

Asuna was visiting the Ocean Turtle, floating in the seas near Izushichi Island, without clarifying the entire issue in detail with her parents. Still, she managed to secure the cooperation of Professor Koujirou Rinko and thought up of an explanation that «couldn't be said to be a complete lie»: "I'll be accompanying the professor and observing the research facility of a certain cutting-edge corporation for a few days".

She herself thought it would be difficult indeed, but her mother, Yuuki Kyouko, stared at Asuna for a short while, then said nothing more than a "Take care of yourself and go". Perhaps, she had already seen through everything, though.

One way or another, the time granted to Asuna was a mere three days from the 5th to the 7th of July. In short, she would have to ride on the helicopter with a regular route towards Shin-Kiba from the Ocean Turtle tomorrow evening. It was unconfirmed whether she would return to Tokyo with Kazuto, but if Nurse Aki's words prove right, she should be able to have a conversation with him conscious.

And at that time, she would get angry a whole lot, cry a whole lot and laugh a whole lot.

Stopping on the steps of the spiral staircase, Asuna took a deep breath before returning to her pace.

The end of the current staircase was in another twenty steps or so above. It wasn't a dead end; she was to go through a round hatch that opened from the massive metal ceiling, but that was the only place where she had to climb, with its short vertical ladder.

This metal floor that was over twenty centimeters thick was the pressure bulkhead made from composite titanium that divided the top and bottom of the Ocean Turtle's main shaft. Lieutenant Nakanishi said it could easily withstand gunfire from an automatic rifle at point-blank range, but that sort of situation obviously shouldn't be happening at all on this megafloat that wasn't even a battleship.

—Kikuoka-san alone was enough for making up exaggerations, but all of those people were much the same.

Muttering so in her heart, she climbed the aluminium alloy ladder and passed through the hatch. The gloomy spiral staircase still continued on ahead, but the tint of the illumination was turning greenish. Much like how the «floor» changed; she held onto such thoughts as she ascended the staircase once more.

The lower part of the upper shaft that she was in now was where the gigantic equipment that served as the physical backbone for «Project Alicization», the «Light Cube Cluster», was stationed. That was likely right beside this narrow stair hall.

Matters related to the Light Cube Cluster were treated with the utmost secrecy, so she wasn't informed on the details of its construction, but she had heard that it was a cluster of countless light cubes, as its name suggested.

The media that stored the artificial fluc lights—or in other words, the souls of the Underworld's residents, those bottom-up AIs, were the light cubes, and in the exact middle, amongst over hundreds of thousands of them arranged in a systematic order, was a single massive cube. A soul didn't exist within that, with the extensive «mnemonic visuals data» of those in the Underworld saved within it instead. That truly was the core of the STL technology, the «Main Visualizer»...

That was how the researcher in charge of Rath, Higa Takeru, lectured to her about the structure of the Underworld while more or less breaking the duty of confidentiality, but honestly speaking, Asuna's "Just what is that supposed to be?" was an unfeigned reaction.

If you're going to tell me so much about it, it should be fine letting me see the Light Cube Cluster in person once at least; when Asuna said that, Higa replied with a wry smile. The entire Cluster's covered by a metal shell, so it's not like you would see anything except a rectangular box, ya know, he said. That shell could be opened by neither Higa nor the rest of the staff, not even the plan's supervisor, a member of the Japan Self-Defense Forces, Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka Seijirou.

As such, all Asuna could do was to faintly imagine what the Cluster looked like.

A countless number of small crystals suspended orderly in darkness. All made in the shape of perfect squares, and the nucleus dedicated to a single larger crystal, with narrow lines of light passing between them without pause. That was just like the heart of a galaxy, densely packed with stars.....

Perhaps it was due to her absentmindedly contemplating those thoughts.

Asuna was a little slow noticing someone descending the spiral staircase.

"Ah, excuse me."

Instinctively lowering her head, she shifted to the left while apologizing in a small voice. That someone slowly started to go past her without even returning the greeting. Each footstep down the steps went clink and whirr.

".....?"

What's with those sounds; Asuna questioningly thought in her heart and finally raised her face, before she stared at the figure just about to pass by her side.

".....!!?"

And then, she audibly leapt back, with her back pressed against the wall.

After all, what came down the staircase was not «someone», but «something». In other words, it wasn't a human no matter how you looked at it.

Its entire silhouette was that of a human, but its skeleton structure was a plain metal frame and countless plastic cylinders were mounted on its limbs and waist. Its joints were complex formations of exposed gears and the multicolored signal cables crept around like blood vessels.

It carried a largish box on its back, with a face composed of three lenses of big, medium and small sizes. They should've placed two of those medium-sized lenses; after thinking up such things, Asuna finally came to her senses. Letting out the breath she choked on, she murmured in a hoarse voice.

"Ro... robot.....?"

In that instant, the mysterious humanoid walking machine suddenly stopped its motion.

Stopping its foot in mid-step, the gears spun and drew back with a whirl. Standing upright on the same step as Asuna, it slowly turned its body towards its left this time... in other words, towards Asuna. The big and medium lenses were pitch-black, but a red light source was within the small lens and as though it was looking at Asuna, it blinked with the light flickering intermittently—

"-h....."

A thin voice escaped from deep in her throat and Asuna tried to retreat backwards. But her back bumped against the stair hall's wall, so she could fall back no further. Whether Asuna shifted to the right or the left, the lens with its red light would follow her face without fail.

Monsters shouldn't spawn on the staircase leading between floors; there shouldn't be any machine-type mobs in the first place; no, wait, this should be the real world; such confusing thoughts flooded her mind as Asuna got ready to flee back to where she came from when that happened—

"C'mon, stop that already, Ichiemom!"

That voice fell from above. Upon taking the time to look, a man was running down the stairs with a flustered expression. With a printed t-shirt and shorts on, his short hair bristled up like a mountain of needles, and wearing a pair of boorish metal-framed glasses, the man was the main researcher in charge of Project Alicization, Higa Takeru. His right hand was holding onto a well-worn mobile PC.

As though it understood the "C'mon" from Higa, the humanoid machine broke its focus off Asuna and spun its body ninety degrees once more.

Asuna finally released the strain on her shoulders and upon looking up at Higa who came to a stop on the step right above, she asked in a relatively wooden voice.

"...Higa-san. What exactly is this?"

"Eh, well... this here's «Ichiemon». Its real name's «Electroactive Muscled Operative Machine»... in short, EMOM, and then adding on the one since it's the first in the series, you get Ichiemom^[3]."

Higa's expression gradually changed from an apologetic one to a boasting one as he answered, so Asuna gave another glare as she asked again.

"...And, what's that Ichiemom doing here?"

Higa was not the one who answered that question.

"Higa-kun's assisting me with the tuning for my program. Even if we aren't senior and junior at that seminar any longer."

Those words mingled with a strained laughter belonged to the woman who came down the stairs after Higa. Wearing a white robe above a dungaree work shirt and jeans, her hair was neatly parted to the side. This woman, whose appearance brought forth the thought that there couldn't be many whom the term 'intellectual' suited so well, was Professor Koujirou Rinko who had played a big part in Asuna's infiltration of the Ocean Turtle.

"Morning, Asuna-san."

"Good morning."

After exchanging greetings with Rinko who came to a stop beside Higa, Asuna examined the robot, or to be accurate, Ichiemom, from top to bottom once more and asked the two researchers.

".....Don't tell me this is a part of Project Alicization as well?"

With Ichiemom leading the ascent up the spiral staircase, upon reaching her destination, the sub control room, Asuna shelved her misgivings about various matters aside and first hurried towards the passage leading to the STL storage room.

Although the door at the end of the narrow passage couldn't be entered, the wall on the left was made from reinforced glass. Pressing her two hands and even sticking her forehead against the glass, she peeked into the storage room almost utterly absent of illumination.

The two gigantic rectangular cuboids, taking up much space side by side, were the Soul TransLator number 4 and number 5. Number 5 was switched off, but many indicators gave off a gentle glow or

flickered on number 4. Upon staring at it, a slender silhouette could be seen lying on the gel bed linked to the main unit.

He was Kirito—Kirigaya Kazuto. The person who, in various ways, was Asuna's «partner».

Kazuto was assaulted by a fugitive from the Death Gun Incident on the roads of Setagaya-ku a week ago. A large quantity of the drug succinylcholine was injected into him and he even went into cardiac arrest for a while.

While he managed to keep his life somehow, thanks to the speedy lifesaving measures taken, the damage to his brain remained due to the cessation of blood circulation. The one who took Kazuto, who could have gone into a vegetative state in the worst case scenario according to a doctor's diagnosis, to the Ocean Turtle and even prepared a fake ambulance for that purpose was Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka Seijirou, the main lead of «Project Alicization».

That difficult choice was due to the belief that the STL could serve as treatment for Kazuto, or so the person himself had said.

One way or another, it seemed that Kazuto's consciousness was now existing in the virtual world, «Underworld», which was adapted into a VR space for treatment. And by revitalizing his consciousness, or in other words, his fluct light there, he should be able to stimulate his neural network. She couldn't quite comprehend even with that explanation, but she understood that Kazuto was not in a mere coma at the very least.

At the moment, Asuna was looking merely at Kazuto's body, with his mind left for some faraway virtual world. Thinking about it, she was in the same position as Kazuto when he paid her visits almost every day when Asuna was once forced to dive into the home of fairies, Alfheim, by Sugou Nobuyuki.

—I wish I could dive into the Underworld to help Kirito-kun out too, just like he did for me back then...

While thinking of such things, her gaze continued fixed on Kazuto for over a whole minute, after which Asuna finally parted from the glass. I'll come again in the noon; whispering so in her heart, she returned to the sub control room.

This place was rather cramped when compared to the main control room at the lower shaft. The control console was the basic version as well, and even the desk and chairs arranged there looked a little cheap.

Higa and Rinko did not sit on the chairs and remained standing as they peeked into the mobile PC on the desk. The unnerving figure of the aforementioned humanoid machine, «Ichiemom», was at their side.

While confirming the robot had entered standby mode, Asuna slowly approached the two.

They were senior and junior of the same university seminar when they were students—additionally, it appears Kayaba Akihiko and Sugou Nobuyuki were admitted there as well—those two scientists were rapidly discussing one thing or another as though they had returned to that time.

"The bottleneck was the processing speed of the balancing system, as I thought. There's still room in the budget, isn't there? Couldn't you use a faster chip?"

"That's as far as my brain gets when I start thinking about the excess heat and battery consumption, ya know. There's no choice but to focus on tuning up the EAP actuators..."

"Those polymer muscles are outdated in the first place. Try using CNT; I believe it'll turn out easier if you do."

"I-If something like that's used, the budget's totally gonna... well, I might be able to get just one of them though..."

"Your frugality in the usage of machinery parts hasn't changed, has it."

Rinko who shook her head in exasperation finally noticed Asuna then and shrugged her shoulders awkwardly.

"Ah, I apologize for that, Asuna-san. For making all that noise."

"No, I believe Kirito-kun would be happy with it livelier around here too."

After replying so with a wry smile, she took another gander at the robot. It seemed the actuators for its entire body were artificial muscles made from organic material. Rath might be on the leading edge of research worldwide, but it did seem unrelated to its main goal of a highly adaptive AI.

Perhaps guessing at that doubt from Asuna, Higa grumbled with his back against the table.

"Building this thing here's a request from that old dude too."

"Eh... Kikuoka-san did? Why would he..."

"I have no idea how serious he was about it either, though..."

The one who gave the answer with a sigh was Rinko.

"A movable body would be needed to invite a fluct light that grew up in the Underworld, don't you think? ...That's what he said."

"Eeh... then, this robot is for an AI to pilot?"

"That's what it seems like."

"Zat's how it is."

Both Rinko and Higa nodded at the same time, so Asuna gazed at Ichiemom's body from top to bottom once more. True, its entire form could be said to be a humanoid, but its frame was angular, its joints jutting out and above all that, the part where silicon or something else covered it made it look unlike a human, no matter how you looked at it.

".....It's not very nice towards Ichiemom, but wouldn't an AI get shocked too, when its body suddenly changes to this...?"

At the very least, Asuna and Kazuto's «daughter», the top-down-type AI, Yui, would definitely reject entering this. Asuna spoke as she thought so and Higa waved about his right hand in a fluster.

"No-no, you should know that nothing's gonna pilot this guy. Ichiemom's a prototype used for data collection, so its mind's on a conventional architecture too; that's why it became this crude. There's a number 2 used for trials for loading an AI on board aside from this guy, so that one's smarter."

"Number 2..... By the way, what is that child's name...?"

Upon Asuna timidly asking, Higa replied with an expression as though the answer was obvious.

"«Niemom», yep."

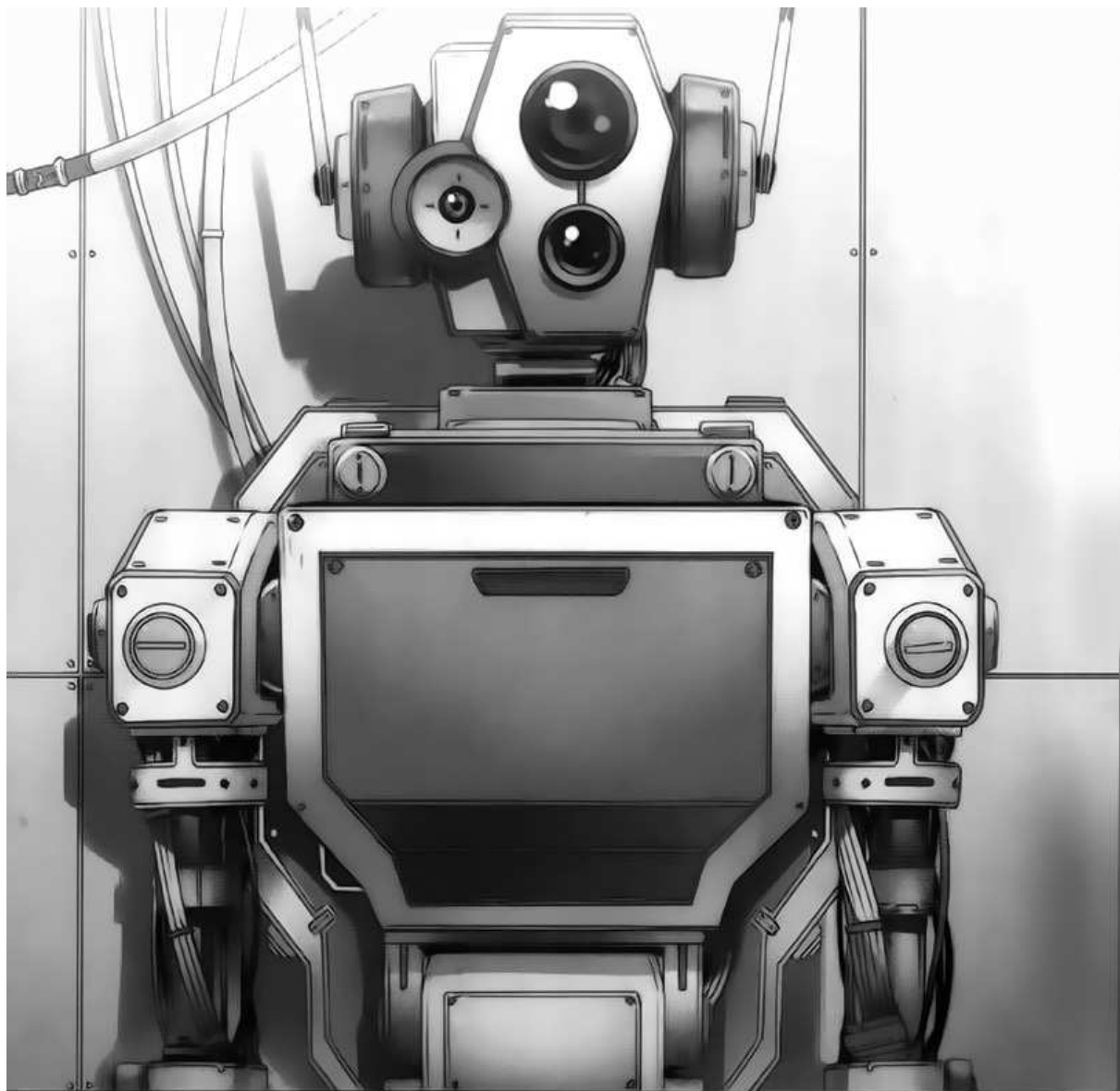
"Zat's so... no, I mean, is that so?"

She lightly shook her head, and then continued her question.

"Why would the type with an AI on board be smarter?"

"Well, that would be because the sensors and balancing system would experience a rapid rise in their performance... or so we expect they would."

Tagging Higa out to answer once again, Rinko took one step sideways and stood on the tiptoes of both her feet for some reason. Spreading her hands out a little, she maintained her posture while swaying her body.



"We humans are always regulating our entire body balance ever so slightly, even while we're standing still as we usually do, without any purpose. And not to mention that's mostly done unconsciously, you see. We can keep our balance without falling over, but still, it's not like our minds are thinking, 'I'll lean over to the right this much, then stretch out my right foot and pull back my left leg.' or anything of that sort. It's all in our minds... in other words, our fluct lights, that the so-called auto-balancing system would control our muscles and skeleton."

The heel of her sneakers thumped onto the ground and she smiled.

"Ichiemom is equipped with servomechanisms that replicate that auto-balancing system mechanically and electronically. However, merely going up and down the stairs slowly like earlier requires a large quantity of sensing and balancing equipment, in conjunction with a high-performance CPU, a battery to run all that and a cooling system for the excess heat, plus a solid frame to support the weight of all of those. That is why Ichiemom couldn't get any smarter."

"But still, this is way closer to a human when you take a look at those from ten years ago."

Turning to Higa who cut into the conversation with a bitter smile, Asuna gave a slow nod.

"In other words... if its mind wasn't a conventional CPU, but an artificial fluct light, the auto-balancer would have the same performance as a human's, so..."

"Yes, that's totally it. We could reduce the number of servomechanisms, even if its just by one, then the frame would get lighter with that and the number of actuators will reduce as well, creating a near-perfect human-shaped body... that would be nice if it happened, but this is well, just my wild observations. I said this earlier, but Niemom at the development department looks pretty human if you look at its silhouette alone."

"If you plan to boast about it that much, I would rather you hurry up and show it to..."

Rinko suddenly went silent after she began speaking. After thinking deeply with a frown, she continued with her tone lowered by a notch.

"...Higa-kun. That Niemom is still not capable of autonomous walking, is it?"

"Heh? Yea, well, of course. There is a CPU on board, but the vital control program's empty and all. Besides, even if the same program as Ichiemom's loaded, Niemom's gonna fall over on the third step with that sensor system, probably."

".....I see..."

Rinko gently nodded and took a deep breath, perhaps for a change of mood, then looked at Asuna.

"Asuna-san, will you be having breakfast now?"

"Ah, yes."

"Then let us go to the dining hall together. It does seem Higa-kun will be eating here with Ichiemom."

She thought it was definitely a joke, but Higa pulled out an energy bar from the pocket of his shorts and waved it left and right with a "Go ahead". Lightly bowing her head half with amazement, half with gratitude, Asuna started to walk behind Rinko.

Looking towards the STL storage room for one last time, her lips merely moved: "See you".

Exiting the passage from the sub control room, human figures were approaching from the direction of the elevator. Two males; both wearing a white robe atop their t-shirts. They were likely from the Rath staff that numbered over ten, but she still didn't know all of their names. They should recognize Asuna as Rinko's assistant, whom she disguised herself as at the start.

Following Rinko, Asuna exchanged a quick bow as well and they went past the two members of the staff, before she felt something and shifted her vision to the side. With their long hair bundled behind and unshaven faces, she couldn't recall seeing those men's profiles before. However—something stuck out deep in her mind. If this was Aincrad, although she wouldn't go as far as to draw her rapier, this sensation would make her touch its grip with her fingertips...

"What's the matter, Asuna-san?"

Rinko called out in a small voice and Asuna finally noticed she was standing still. The male staff were going further away towards the sub control room with the pitter-patter of their resin sandals.

"...No, it's nothing."

Even after she replied and started walking again, Asuna tried to search for the source of the queer sensation for a while. But as her mind drifted from one thing to another, that feeling faded away and vanished.

Chapter 6 - The Prisoners and the Knight (5th Month of Human World Calendar 380)

Part 1

There are still times when the memories of the days I was imprisoned within the Floating Castle Aincrad come to me even now.

In those times... each day felt truly long, especially during the first year of that death game. That was as I always had to put my guard up against assaults from monsters (at times, players) whenever I was out of town and packed my schedule close to its brim to ensure that my actions maintained my rate of leveling up at its maximum potential.

I shaved away my sleeping hours to the bare minimum necessary to keep my concentration and even as I ate my meals, I devoted myself to storing all kinds of data from the information brokers. I certainly was named a delinquent by the clearing group in the late-game period and even used up an entire day on napping, but I have no recollection of wasting time on doing nothing. Such that my senses could tell me that the fourteen years before SAO and the two years spent in that floating castle held an equal level of significance.

In comparison—

The days passed by so quickly ever since I was thrown into this strange world, «Underworld».

It definitely wasn't as if I spent the time loafing around. The days over these two years that included me leaving on a journey from Rulid Village, entering the guard corps at Zakkaria City and learning at the Sword Mastery Academy in Central Centoria were bustling, rather; perhaps more so than my time in SAO, if you looked at merely how hectic it was. But still, looking back on it now, the only emotion that welled up from me was the strong notion that it passed by in the blink of an eye.

The reason was—the lack of peril in my HP, known as Life, dropping to zero in this world, perhaps.

Or perhaps, it was due to the heightened acceleration of time flowing in this world in comparison to the real world.

When I took up a part-time job at the venture company with many mysteries surrounding it, «Rath», the Fluctlight Acceleration of the STL was explained as a maximum of three times of the usual pace to me. But that was likely, no, unmistakably a lie. Judging from various data, I have currently estimated the degree of my current FLA to have reached at least a thousand times. If that number was accurate, the approximately two years I have spent in this world would end up as a mere eighteen hours in the real world. That ridiculous amplification must have made me feel the days here to be short, coupled with the lack of danger to my life as well.

...No.

There might also be one other reason, perhaps.

That would be how I felt my life here... especially the days I spent in the Sword Mastery Academy with Eugeo, Sortiliena-senpai, Ronye and Tiezé, to be enjoyable. Despite how entering the academy and polishing my swordsmanship should have been for the sake of escaping this world even a single day earlier. The wish to continue these enjoyable days from the depths of my heart was truly what made the time stream by so quickly.

In that case, that would be a betrayal. Of those who should be anxious over my body in the real world, Asuna, Sugu, Sinon, and the rest.

I wonder if this was retribution for that betrayal. To meet a bloodstained end in my Sword Mastery Academy life, and to be bound to the ground in a place without the slightest hint of sunlight—

Ceasing my thoughts and rousing my upper body, the steel chain firmly binding my right wrist jangled with a dull noise.

Shortly after, I heard a low murmur from the darkness nearby.

"...So you're up, Kirito."

"Aah... I've been for a while. Sorry, did I wake you up?"

After whispering my question in the same manner to not alert the jailer, it was a small bitter laugh that reached me this time.

"How could I sleep. ...You're the odd one, Kirito, being able to sleep and snore away ever since the night we got thrown in jail."

"It's the second among the essential points of the Aincrad-style. Sleep when you can."

While voicing out whatever came to mind, I looked around once again.

That said, the surroundings were wrapped in a murky darkness, with the meager light that escaped from the jailer's guardroom at the end of the passage beyond the prison bars being the only source of illumination. It was at a level where I could somehow make out Eugeo's outlines on the adjacent bed when I concentrated my eyes there.

Of course, I had mastered elementary sacred arts like lighting up a stick that would work ever since long ago, but it seems all kinds of ceremonies were cancelled in this jail as a precaution.

I couldn't get a proper look at Eugeo's countenance, but I faced roughly where his face was and asked after a slight hesitation.

"How's it going... calmed down a little?"

It ought to be around 3 AM right now, going by my body clock. We were thrown into this underground jail yesterday afternoon, so that meant the highest estimate for the time that crawled on by, since that incident from the previous evening, was around thirty-five hours. Eugeo must have received a severe, indescribable shock, going against the Taboo Index by cutting Humbert Zizek with the Blue Rose Sword and witnessing Raios Antinous having his mind broken and dying immediately after that.

A short silence descended before a voice replied, weaker than before.

"Somehow... it's like all a dream... Me drawing a sword on Humbert... and then, Raios just went....."

"...Don't brood over it too much. Think only about the things yet to come for the time being."

I managed to tell those words to Eugeo, sunk in silence. I really wanted to pat his back at least, but the chain obstructed me from reaching the next bed. I focused my eyes upon the outlines of my dear friend; even though it was frail, a "Got it, don't worry about me." came back, and I took a soft breath.

The one who sliced off Raios Antinous's two wrists was not Eugeo, but me. It shouldn't have been a fatal wound if it received immediate treatment, but his thoughts probably descended into a state similar to an infinite loop as a result of processing the priorities between «his own Life» and «the Taboo Index», thus making his fluchtlight break down.

Of course, I am conscious of the fact that it ended with a life stolen from the Underworld people. However, I had killed goblins in the cave north of Rulid to help Apprentice Sister Selka two years ago; I

killed two beasts, no, two people among their ranks. Both Raio and those goblins were fellow artificial flughts, so if I were to be tormented by the crime and unable to recover from it, it would be a dishonor in a sense, to that goblin leader who was much stronger than Raio.

However—it still didn't explain things.

I surmised that the objective of the company that operates the Underworld, Rath, and consequently, Kikuoka Seijrou, was the creation of a perfect artificial intelligence.

The artificial flughts living in this world already possessed a level of emotional awareness and thought equivalent to people of the real world. If their one and only flaw was their «absolute blind obedience to the law», that would mean Eugeo, who drew his Blue Rose Sword and cut Humbert to help Tiezé and Ronye, had now overcome that barrier. To put it another way, a breakthrough was finally achieved and he should be progressing towards a true artificial intelligence now.

Despite that, even after thirty-five hours had passed internally since then, the world still showed no sign of stopping. Either the acceleration rate was too high and the staff at Rath had yet to detect the situation, or a major incident beyond my imagination had happened...

"The things... yet to come, huh."

Eugeo suddenly muttered that from the adjacent bed, so I put my doubts aside and shifted my vision back from the ceiling where it went without me noticing. The silhouette I had gotten used to seeing within the darkness gave a nod and continued speaking.

"It's like you said, Kirito. If we don't escape from this jail and confirm what happened to Alice somehow..."

I scrutinized the significance within my dear friend's earlier words while being relieved that he was somehow recovering from the shock. Eugeo said 'escape from this jail' without any hesitation. In other words, Alice was more important to him now, when compared to this jail which could be said to be a symbol of the Axiom Church's authority—that is to say, a place where one should remain without god's pardon. Eugeo's mental make-up certainly did undergo a major transformation after the experiences from the day before yesterday.

But this was no time to delve in depth. It wouldn't be strange for the department in charge of the trial or the executioners to come drag us out anytime after sunrise. As Eugeo said, we should only think about one thing or another after we escape this place.

"Aah. ...There should definitely be a way out of here."

—If this was an «imprisonment event» in a RPG, at least.

Appending some pointless words to it within my mind, I tried touching the chain that bound me once again. The ring placed around my right wrist was welded to the despairingly tough steel, cold to the touch, that had its other end connected to a ring embedded in the wall. I had already affirmed that nothing could be done about the handcuffs, ring on the wall and the chain itself, by merely pulling on them.

The previous morning, Eugeo and I had crossed the walls of the Axiom Church Central Cathedral at last, our final objective ever since we left on our journey from the northern edge. Our entire bodies were rigidly bound and suspended from a flying dragon's feet, though.

Without any time to appreciate the gigantic white tower rising through the clouds, we were walked down an endless spiral staircase leading underground on the opposite site of the tower, and then handed over to a terrifying jailer when we finally reached the underground jail.

The integrity knight who called herself Alice Synthesis Thirty left without even a parting glance upon accomplishing her role, and the giant jailer who wore a metal mask resembling a kettle moved sluggishly... but connected Eugeo and I to the chains in this jail with sure motions.

We had only had one meal since then, of rock-hard, dry bread and a leather sac filled with lukewarm water flung through the bars that evening. In comparison, treatment and such received by the orange players imprisoned within the Black Iron Castle's jails in Aincrad could be said to be equal to that of a suite room in some high-class hotel.

The attempts to cut the chain, including methods such as pulling, biting, and using sacred arts, all ended in failure yesterday. A chain like these would be sliced apart in a single stroke if we had Eugeo's Blue Rose Sword or my black one; even though Ronye and Tiezé went through great pains to carry them along, wounding their hands, the two swords went with Alice to some unknown location. The bento brought by Ronye avoided seizure, but it had already disappeared into our stomachs long ago.

In other words, though I did say 'there should be a way to get out of here', we were presently in a state unbearably close to being completely and utterly cornered.

"...I wonder if Alice... was bound here eight years ago too..."

As he sat on the bed, a sheer old rag set upon an iron frame, Eugeo spoke, debilitated.

"Well... who knows?"

It wasn't a proper answer, but there was no other. If Eugeo's childhood friend and Selka's elder sister, Alice Schuberg, received the same treatment as us, that would mean she was taken away by that iron-masked jailer and chained in this jail at a mere age of eleven, all by herself. She certainly must have felt a dreadful amount of terror.

Soon after, that girl would be stationed in a stand during a trial, handed down some sort of sentence—and after that...?

"Hey, Eugeo. I'm just confirming again here, but... that integrity knight named Alice Synthesis Thirty was definitely that Alice you're looking for, yes?"

I asked hesitatingly and several seconds later, the voice that flowed felt as though it was holding back some sort of grief.

"That voice... that golden hair and those deep blue eyes. There's no way I could forget those; that's Alice. It's just... the air around her was practically like that of someone else..."

"Well, she did beat up her childhood friend without any mercy, after all. In other words... her memories and thoughts are being controlled through some sort of means, perhaps that's how it is..."

"But there weren't any sacred arts like that in the textbooks, you know?"

"Some great minister in the church could manipulate even Life, right? It wouldn't be strange if the same could be done with memories."

That's right—the machine I was using to dive into the Underworld, the «Soul TransLator», was certainly capable of that. If it was capable of memory manipulation on the brain of a living being, a deeper level of manipulation should be possible and easier on artificial fluctlights probably stored on some kind of media. I continued with that in mind.

"But... if that knight really was Alice, just what was «that»? The one from two years ago, in the northern cave at Rulid..."

"Aah... you did say that, didn't you. That you heard a voice like Alice's when you tried to treat my wound with Selka..."

I didn't tell Eugeo in detail, but I had to borrow power from Selka and share my own Life directly to help him after he suffered a severe injury in the fight with the goblins. It was a rather dangerous act and my Life fell at a rate beyond my expectations, and when I then resigned myself to not lasting any further—I heard it.

'Kirito, Eugeo... I'll wait, no matter how long... I'll always be waiting for the both of you at the top of the Central Cathedral...'

A mysterious, warm light which healed Eugeo's and my Lives filled me as that voice spoke. So that wasn't a mere befuddlement in my memories. We were definitely helped out by Alice, taken away to the Axiom Church long, long ago, through some unknown power.

After we judged it as such, Eugeo and I aimed for the Central Cathedral and came all the way to the central, putting our faith in that voice.

However, the «Alice» that appeared before us, unforeseen, named herself not as the daughter of Rulid Village's chief, Alice Schuberg, but as Integrity Knight Alice Synthesis Thirty. The demeanor she kept to the very end, considering us criminals who deserved to be judged, gave absolutely no impression of her being Eugeo's childhood friend.

She was another person who simply had a face and name that resembled her, or possibly she was the true Alice with her memories controlled. To confirm that, we would probably have no choice but to escape the jail somehow and personally head up towards the peak of the Central Cathedral—a place where we could learn everything about the Axiom Church.

That was our intention in the end, but it didn't seem like we would be able to make even a minor scratch on the chains or bars.

"Aah, how annoying... I would tie God up right here if I could, and get the truth out, not missing a single detail!"

I spat that out in a small voice with Kikuoka Seijirou's spectacled face feigning ignorance showing up in my head, before Eugeo replied in a whisper mingled with bitter laughter.

"Hey, hey, slandering Stacia-sama in the church isn't a good idea, no matter how you think about it. You might even incur divine punishment."

Apparently, it doesn't seem like he lost his religious faith or anything even if his priorities concerning the Taboo Index changed. —Although I had that in mind, I ended up carelessly adding on another flippant line.

"Well, if she's going to, couldn't she inflict divine punishment onto this chain too?"

I said, and it suddenly came to me; I changed my tone and continued.

"Wait. Speaking of Stacia-sama, do «windows» not appear here either?"

"Now that you mention it, we haven't tried. Go for it."

"Aah."

After taking a peek at the state of the jailer's guardroom, left of the passage beyond the bars, I stretched out both the index and middle fingers on my right hand. Upon performing the gesture to call out the Stacia Window that my arm had completely gotten used to, I lightly knocked on the chain gripped in my left hand.

After an instant, the familiar pale-purple window floated out. I doubted the situation would change for the better even if I confirmed the chain's properties, but nevertheless, being able to gather information was delightful.

"Oh, it came out."

I grinned at Eugeo before looking into the window. The data shown was a stark three lines, its unique object ID, the durability that I was sick of below it, 【23500/23500】 , and a string of characters, 【*Class 38 Object*】 .

Class 38; the figure was a priority far higher than a great number of renowned swords, but it was not a match for the 45 of the sacred instrument, the Blue Rose Sword, or the 46 of the black sword polished up from a branch of the «Divine Giant Cedar», the Gigas Cedar, over the course of a year. In other words, it really would be possible to cut this chain apart if we had either of those swords, but there was no point in saying that now.

Having copied me by making the window for his own chain show, Eugeo whispered in an expected dismal voice.

"Wah, so that's why it wouldn't even budge no matter how much we pulled. Without a weapon or tool of Class 38 as well at least, cutting these chains would be..."

"That's how it is."

I took yet another look around the dim and narrow jail, but only the crude iron beds and empty water sacs were around. I figured the bed leg could serve as a replacement for a crowbar and brought out its window with a sliver of hope, but it was a worthless Class 3 item, as it appeared to be. The bars looked far sturdier, but my hand couldn't reach far enough due to the chain's length.

When I spun my neck restlessly looking around, still unwilling to give up, Eugeo spoke limply.

"No matter how hard you search, some renowned sword won't just conveniently drop in a jail like this. In the first place, there aren't enough things around to even call it a search. There are only the beds, water sacs and this chain here."

"Only... this chain..."

Muttering, I gazed at the chain binding my own arms and next, at the chain stretching out from Eugeo's wrist. A certain idea came to mind in that moment, and I whispered while holding back my excitement.

"No, it's not «only». We have two of them, don't we; of these bastard chains."

"Hah?"

What are you talking about; I gestured at Eugeo to get off the bed with my hand as he inclined his head to express that thought. Following that, I went down onto the stone floor as well and checked my partner's standing posture that could be faintly seen through the dim lighting.

A crude metal ring was fixed upon his right wrist just like mine, peeking out from the academy uniform he had on since yesterday, and the long chain melded to it was connected to the hook embedded in the wall behind the bed.

I first passed under the chain that extended under Eugeo's right hand, and then straddled it as I returned to my original position. This made our chains into a crossed X shape. Gesturing Eugeo to move back a little, while I got some distance away myself, a strained, ear-piercing scrapping noise rang out from where the two chains crossed.

Looking at that sight, it seems Eugeo finally guessed at my intentions.

"Erm, Kirito, don't tell me we're going to just pull like this?"

"Sure we are. These two chains have the exact same priority, so logically, this should shave away both of their Lives at the same time. We'll find out if we try, hurry up and grip onto the chain with both hands."

Suspicion still remained on Eugeo, but he gripped onto the chain that extended from his right wrist as I had instructed and lowered his waist. I did the same, then-

"Hold on, before that..."

-cutting the seal with my left hand, I called out the chain's «window» once again.

Even if I were to try this exact same method to cut thick iron chains like these apart in the real world, it would probably take all my might to make a shallow nick on their surfaces.

However, everything might seem real here in the Underworld, but it wasn't like they obeyed the laws of physics the exact same way as the real world. Like how a giant tree with a diameter of four meters could be chopped down in a mere few days using the sacred instrument, the Blue Rose Sword, if two objects were to collide with more than a certain amount of speed and strength, the one with the higher priority would definitely destroy the other eventually.

We synchronized our timing through our eyes, going "one-two", then pulled the thick chains with all the physical strength we could muster.

Cling! The moment that dull, violent, metallic noise rang out, I was about to pitch forward due to Eugeo's strength being more ridiculous than expected, before I braced my feet with my guts. The other side's aversion to losing was revealed on his face after a while, and we continued our power struggle, partially forgetting about our initial objective.

Ear-piercing, creaking noises and small, orange sparks sprang out from where the chains intersected intermittently. Even while maintaining the tug of war, I reached my head out and peeked into the «window» still open.

"Ooh."

I wanted to assume a victory pose, but both of my hands were sealed away, so I settled with a grin. The over-twenty-thousand points of the chain's Life had its ones column streaming away at a speed that even I couldn't follow with my eyes, while the tens column was reducing at a bewildering rate. It would probably reach zero in several minutes with this spurt. Clenching my teeth once again, I continued gathering all my might for the tug of war against Eugeo.

Of course, this method wouldn't be possible without meeting the conditions of having two sets of chains and prisoners, with the prisoners' «Object Control Authorities»—a parameter equivalent to Strength in SAO—at a sufficiently high value. Hence, I believe Alice who was imprisoned by her lone self at the age of eleven, eight years ago, wasn't able to cut her chain.

That girl was definitely withdrawn from the planned trial, with something happening to her after that. If that Integrity Knight Alice was the Alice from Rulid, «something» that was able to even control her memories and thoughts, turning her into a loyal guard of the Axiom Church, did...

Due to my inadvertent contemplation, I ended up forgetting a crucial fact. The reason why I had the window out was to stop the tug of war immediately before the chain's Life became zero. As for the reason, if it wasn't done—

Ping! A shrill, metallic sound reverberated, different from those before.

Without even the time to consider that, Eugeo and I were blown backwards by a vehement force and knocked the back of our heads against the hefty stone walls.

Squatting on the floor for a bit and holding my head with both hands, I endured the authentic pain and dizziness brought about by the STL. After those settled down, I peeked through the bars, expecting the jailer to have noticed what happened this time for sure, but there was no response, fortunately. Letting out a relieved sigh, I got up gingerly.

Eugeo, slower to rise, was dazed as he rubbed his head with his left hand.

"Uugh... my Life dropped by a hundred from that just now."

"That's barely anything for what we got out of it. Come on, look."

I put out my right arm and shook the chain dangling powerlessly from the metal ring. There was still a length of at least one mel, twenty cen, no, one meter, twenty centimeters, and it was magnificently severed. The four U-shaped pieces of metal that rolled onto the floor were the two rings at the intersection that continued to withstand the pressure from the tug of war before breaking apart in the middle. They crumbled with a fleeting noise and vanished as I looked at them.

I brought out the «window» for the broken link of the chain that hung off my right wrist in a sudden bout of curiosity and upon looking at it, its Life was at 18000 and still recovering, a value amazingly close to what it originally was.

I believed in my prediction, or rather, hope, that the three meter long chain would dissipate entirely the instant it reached zero from the strain, but it seems to have been reclassified as a new chain object, perhaps due to it consisting of many linked rings.

As I thought over such matters, Eugeo, inspecting his own chain as well, made an exaggerated motion with his shoulders and spoke.

"Geez... there's no way I'll ever catch up with your talent at doing illogical things like this, Kirito."

"Hmph, my slogan is irrational, illogical, indiscreet, after all. ...That said, it doesn't seem like anything could've been done about this..."

We were freed from the condition of being not more than three mel, no, meters from the inner wall, but I couldn't think of any method to remove the chain's tail that remained on our right hands. Even if we were to carry out a tug of war yet again, the length might shorten, but it wouldn't be possible to take it off entirely.

"Looks like there's no choice but to bring it along. It's a little heavy, but I don't think it'll be a hindrance to walking if it's wrapped around the arm."

Eugeo said so and started wrapping the tail round and round his forearm, so I reluctantly followed his example. Upon completing the impromptu chain gauntlet, our faces met each other with cynical smiles.

"...Now, then."

I believed that this, at least, had to be confirmed before taking the next action and looked at Eugeo solemnly. Taking in a deep breath, I spoke.

"I'll ask this first... but you get it, don't you, Eugeo? Escaping from here and searching for the truth regarding Alice would be the same as opposing the Axiom Church head on. We won't have the time for conflict over each and every action we take. If you can't prepare yourself now, it's better if you stay behind."

Those words were probably some of the most severe among those I had used over our over-two-years relationship, but there was no avoiding them.

He might look calm on the surface, but Eugeo's fluctlight... in other words, his soul that was a collection of photons had just undergone an intense structural change. After all, he had rejected his long, long belief in the absolute authority of the Axiom Church, one he had had ever since he gained awareness, and reorganized the issues that should take priority over it.

In other words, Eugeo should be thought of as more unstable than he looked at the moment, and if too much load were to be placed onto his currently-resetting thought pattern, it might truly induce abnormalities into his soul like Raio. That was why I had tried to avoid broaching subjects related to the Axiom Church or Taboo Index for these thirty-five hours.

However, if we were to take the radical action of escaping from this jail and trespassing into the Central Cathedral, I hoped he would fortify his will as much as he could now, rather than risk a sudden conflict midway. I must do whatever I can to have Eugeo safely arrive at the highest floor of the cathedral—the place where the console to exit to the real world should be.

Yes, I intended to make my unrivalled partner and closest friend meet with people from the real world.

The Underworld right now was one result from an experiment carried out by the company Rath, and it wouldn't be strange for it to be completely reset anytime. In that situation, the fluctlights of nearly a hundred thousand people living in this world would probably be indiscriminately erased. There was no way I could forgive that. I must have the staff from Rath and the wire-puller, Kikuoka Seijirou, communicate directly with Eugeo and make them aware of what they've created at all costs.

The people of the Underworld were definitely not NPCs of some virtual world.

They, with thoughts and emotions equivalent to people from the real world, deserved the right to live on here.

Prepare yourself now; Eugeo heard those words of mine and opened his eyes wide for an instant, before he cast them downwards eventually. Bringing up his right hand, he held his fist firmly before his chest.

"...Aah... I know."

The voice that came out was a quiet whisper but carried an unshakeable resolve in its reverberations.

"I have already decided. To return back to Rulid Village with Alice, I'll even go against the Axiom Church. If the need arises, I'll unsheathe my sword and fight, no matter how many times. ...If that integrity knight is the real Alice, I'll find out the reason behind her loss of memory and return her to how she was. That's more important than anything else to me."

Having finished his speech and raised his face, Eugeo looked straight at me with eyes shining brightly while he made a small smile.

"You said this when we were playing around in the woods, didn't you, Kirito. That 'there are things that must be done even if it's prohibited by the law'. I feel like I've understood its meaning at last."

".....I see."

I deeply swallowed the odd, strong emotion that filled my chest along with the chilly air. Nodding, I lightly pat my partner's left shoulder after a step forward.

"I definitely understand your resolve now. ...But after we leave this place, let's avoid fights as much as we can. I don't think we have much of a chance in an actual brawl with Alice or the other integrity knights."

"Those sure are timid words coming from you, Kirito."

Replying that those guys are the strongest in the world to the grinning Eugeo, I walked closer towards the bars that separated the jail from the passage. Let's pull the «window» out from this thick and heavy iron rod with a diameter that looked to be around three centimeters. The object's class was—20. It had a Life close to ten thousand.

Eugeo who stood beside me peeked into the window as well and gave a short sigh.

"Hmm... it's not as bad as the chains, but it would take some time to bend them barehanded. What should we do, want to try ramming it together?"

"If we do something like that, our Lives will end up falling along with the grids'. I have an idea, just sit back and watch."

I gestured Eugeo to fall back and untangled the chain wrapped around my right arm. I said it like I really thought up of a plan beforehand, but it only came to mind when I was wrapping this chain. Sortiliena-senpai, who I was under the tutelage of for an entire year in the Sword Mastery Academy, wound that up in circles the same way when she was done with it. The weapon that symbolized the Serlut-style, that white leather whip.

Looking at me as I slowly shook the chain with a length of 1.2 meter held in my right hand, Eugeo gave a worried whisper.

"Ki-Kirito, are you planning to break the grids with that? If your aim goes bad and it hits you, won't you get a heavy inju..."

"It's fine, I got plenty of coaching on how to use a whip from Liena-senpai. She was called the «Walking Tactics Manual», after all... Listen, as you might expect, blowing off the bars will probably make a seriously massive noise, so sprint for the stairs. Make sure you flee instead of fight if the jailer comes out."

"...Oh now. Plenty, you say, huh."

Putting Eugeo's strange response aside, I slowly increased the swinging range of the chain. Its length didn't quite make the cut for a whip, but it should have the force of a Class 38 priority to compensate for that.

—Strike, focusing not on the hand that held the whip but on the weight of its tip.

Recalling Liena-senpai's words, I pulled back the chain with force and right before it extended completely, I made a full swing with a yell.

"Sei!"

The end of the chain that rushed through the air like a dark grey snake attacked where the three centimeters thick iron rods intersected without miss, scattering dazzling sparks in the darkness.

Blang! Along with the loud noise that rang out, the bars were blown off from their frames above and below them, vehemently striking the grid of the opposite cell before they fell onto the floor. If there were any prisoners there, they must have thought it was a divine punishment from Solus or something.

With the dense cloud of dust that swelled up choking my breath, I tumbled out into the passage. That kettle-head jailer must have definitely leapt to his feet if he heard that noise earlier. I doubted he was as strong as an integrity knight, but I preferred to avoid battles while I had nothing but a single chain as a substitute for a whip.

I examined the end of the passage with my body tensed, but even after several seconds passed, there was no sign of anyone. Taking fleeting glances at Eugeo who got out of the jail after me, I quickly whispered.

"It might be an ambush. Be prepared."

"Got it."

Exchanging nods and albeit it being far too late, we silenced our footsteps as we began running.

According to the information I hammered into my mind when we were arrested, this Axiom Church underground jail was constructed with eight passages extending out like the spokes of a wheel, and each passage housed four holding cells on both of its sides. If all of the cells held two each, it could be calculated as $8 \times 8 \times 2$ for a capacity of a hundred and twenty-eight people, but I believed it impossible for this jail to have ever been fully occupied since it was built.

The eight passages convened at the small jailer's guardroom in the space near where the wheel hub would be, with a spiral staircase extending aboveground surrounding it. It would be the best case scenario if we could slip through the jailer's attack and leap onto the staircase. With that in mind as I ran through the passage, I stood still before the guardroom and spied on the state inside.

Small lamps were suspended off the cylindrical guardroom's wall, faintly illuminating their surroundings. There was no sign of movement, but I couldn't help but feel that the jailer was lurking in a blind spot from the exit, equipped with some horrifying weapon.

"...Hey, Kirito."

"Shh!"

"Oh c'mon, Kirito."

As I looked for a presence beyond the corner, my shoulder was poked by Eugeo from behind, so I reluctantly turned back.

"What is it?"

"Hey, this sound... isn't this snoring?"

"...What."

When I listened carefully like I was told to, I certainly noticed it was present, though extremely faint; a constant, familiar low sound repeating itself.

"....."

I took another look at Eugeo in the face, then lightly shook my head and started walking out.

Beyond the end of the passage (of course, there wasn't a single rat in the corner's blind spot) was a reasonably wide circular space and a stone pillar with a diameter of around five meters standing in the middle. The interior of the pillar was hollow, being the jailer's guardroom and as such, the origin of the snores.

A black, iron door was fitted on the side of the pillar with a small peeping window on its upper portion. Eugeo and I concealed our footsteps as we approached the door, peeping in through the window, our faces practically stuck on it.

There was no great difference in the crude bed installed in the exact middle of the round room when compared to the one in the jail, and the jailer slept on it as though his massive barrel-like frame was

crushing it. The metal mask that reminded one of a kettle was still worn on and its tin surface vibrated, matching the heavy and low snores.

It was a scene where we should hurry and escape, but I found myself carelessly speculating on his circumstances. Being the lookout all by himself in this jail where prisoners and such rarely came; there was no mistake he had continued that for years... or to be negative, tens of years. After all, in this world, even a child born as a noble would be bestowed a «sacred task» from the one in charge of the area upon turning ten of age, with neither the option to personally choose it, nor to change it halfway through.

Waking according to the faint sound of the time bell in this underground space that sunlight couldn't reach and patrolling an empty jail, then sleeping according to the bell once again. Day after day, he must have repeated nothing but that as his own job. So many times that he did not even stir from his sleep when we made that much noise.

A countless number of keys of various sizes hung from the guardroom's wall. I believed that the keys to remove the metal rings fitted on our right wrists were among them, but without any mood to disrupt the jailer's sleep and fight for that reason, I took a step back and muttered.

"...Let's go."

"Aah... yeah."

It seems that something was on Eugeo's mind too. We softly parted from the window and set our feet upon the spiral staircase that encircled the guardroom, and then earnestly continued the ascent without a single glance back.

Part 2

The spiral staircase felt rather long when we descended, but it took mere minutes before we could sense the exit's presence when we keenly raced our way up. The putrid stench gradually disappeared from the air, while the damp, moist walls and the stone under our feet were replaced by glossy marble without our notice.

We could soon see a faint light in our path, and when it turned into the rectangular exit, Eugeo and I found no further need for caution and rushed forth, skipping over the steps, two at a time. Both of us sucked in the fresh air as though satisfying our cravings, the moment we reached aboveground at last.

".....Whew..."

When our breaths finally settled down, we took another look at our surroundings. The skies which were still pitch-black granted us vision even without artificial lighting, through their indistinct starlight.

The Axiom Church that ruled over the Human World existed within a vast square plot of ground in the center of Central Centoria. From what I had seen around the place through the opportunity of dangling off the flying dragon yesterday morning, the main gate was in the east (I suppose that was probably due to Solus rising from that direction), with a wide road that extended to the actual church.

And that church was veritably the lofty white tower, the «Central Cathedral». Its cross-sectional view would reveal that it, too, was a square, while its upright walls were smoothly polished to a mirror-like finish, with the upper portion always within the clouds, making it impossible to see its peak unobstructed.

I believed that there would be someone managing this world at the highest part of the cathedral, as well as a system console for communication with the outside—or in other words, with Rath. If I could reach that far, I could return to the real world after these two years and two months I personally experienced...

Reflecting on those strong emotions, I slowly turned around and faced the opening to the underground jail I had just escaped from.

The doorless rectangular hole was opening its mouth in slight surprise, towards the pure white surface of the wall. Shifting my sight to the smoothly polished marble wall, I first gazed right, then left, and lastly, up, but factoring the dense shroud of night fog in as well, I wasn't able to see to the end of any direction.

No, even if it wasn't for the fog, I shouldn't have been able to see the top of the wall. After all, the glossy marble a mere meter away was undeniably the outer wall of our final destination, the Central Cathedral.

Probably having thought of the same thing, Eugeo took several steps forward with me, and then raising our left hands, we gently touched the white wall. Rubbing left and right, affirming its sheer hard and cold sensation.

"...It's too late saying this after having come this far, but... I can't quite believe it. We're touching that cathedral. The tower with walls that people are denied from, no matter how distinguished they may be, as nobles... no, even if they were the emperors of the four empires, they wouldn't be able to do anything but look at it."

"Well, we're not integrity knights as planned, but escaped prisoners, though."

Eugeo gave a light, strained laugh at my spiritless response, but immediately spoke with a stern face.

"But looking back at it, this might have been the right choice instead. After all, if we became integrity knights, we might, just like Alice..."

"The possibility of our memories being controlled, huh. That's certainly true... however, if all of the integrity knights were that way, who exactly would they believe themselves to be...?"

When I muttered so, Eugeo removed his hand from the marble and tilted his head. I smacked the left hand, that I lowered as well, onto my waist, attempting to explain my vague question.

"That is to say, well, even if the memories of the knights were sealed away... who are my parents; where was I born; they should have knowledge of such things, right? After all, that's the fundamental basics of being a human and all. That's exactly why I think it'd be difficult to fabricate that knowledge."

"I see... knights are just a flight away from anywhere in the Human World with their flying dragons. Even if the true memories about their birth were sealed, with false memories planted in, it would be easily revealed as a lie if they actually pay a visit to their birthplace..."

Suddenly, Eugeo sharply took in a breath of air and stared in my direction with his eyes open wide, which made me blink my eyes multiple times in confusion. After exchanging stares with my frozen partner for several seconds, I finally thought of the reason for his strange response.

"I see... you thought that we might find out a method to restore my memories at this tower, huh."

"Ah... n-no, I..."

Eugeo's face distorted into wrinkles and he soon turned it steeply downwards, so I took a step forward and forcefully tussled my partner's flaxen hair with my left hand.

"You're a worrywart as always. I said it, didn't I; whether my memories return or not, I'll accompany you until the end of your journey."

Eugeo brought his face up with that, slightly red now, and said "Don't treat me like a child" in a child-like manner. But without even attempting to escape from my hand, he continued in a soft voice.

".....It's not like I doubt that. You did say it countless times after all, Kirito. But... when I think about how our journey's coming to a close, I just..."

Upon hearing that stifled whisper, strong feelings thoroughly filled up even my chest, and I raised up Eugeo's face with my hand still placed on his head.

The majesty of the Central Cathedral, towering up high right beside us, truly deserved to be called the core of the world. It would not be easy to climb up to the highest floor of this tower even if there aren't any obstacles in the way, but on the flip side, that was all that's left. No matter how many thousand flights of stairs there might be, our journey would come to an end once we climb our way through all of them, over a year ahead of schedule.

However, that was definitely not a farewell for all of eternity. I would log out to the real world for the time being, but I will return without fail. To meet with Eugeo, Liena-senpai, Ronye, Tiezé and the many other people.

"If it's going to end, we might as well end it on a *happ*... no, good note. You will get Alice's memories back and return to Rulid together. ...But will you have no choice but to choose a sacred task once again? It would be better to think about it starting from now, the next will likely be the last for the rest of your life, after all."

Eugeo finally lifted his head at my nonchalant words and showed his usual smile, as though to express the thought "my, my".

"It's too early for that no matter how you look at it. But, well, I'm already sick of woodcutting one way or another."

"Haha, that's right."

It was when I took my hand off Eugeo's head and strongly pat his right shoulder that the bell of time telling, far above us at the cathedral, rang out in an exceptionally beautiful and dignified timbre. It was the 4 A.M. melody. Another hour until dawn—

"...Looks like we should get going soon."

"Yeah. Let's."

As if to confirm our mutual decision, we lightly knocked our left fists against each other. The force used, the timing, and even the firmness of our fists were exactly the same. To insist that there was no need for any further words, both of us checked out the surroundings once again.

I knew nothing but that our current location was the back (in other words, the west) of the Central Cathedral. Naturally, we were obstructed by the marble outer wall in the east.

Our present goal was to infiltrate the cathedral, so things would be easy if there were an entrance to the first floor nearby, but there wasn't a single window even at rather great heights on this western side, with its slippery finish making it look impossible to climb.

In that case, the next plan would, of course, be to move towards the north or south along the outer wall. However, after a mere five meters or so down either direction, a metal fence was connected perpendicularly to the wall. It seemed of a height that could be climbed over if we tried hard enough, but there was one problem. I had already confirmed the fact that there were similar fences stretching out over and over again beyond that fence, yesterday.

The bronze fence, vines densely twining around it, appeared sturdier than the bars of the underground jail, judging from its shine. There was no end to these fences stretching around this area on the west of this cathedral. In other words, this place was both a garden and a maze at the same time. Probably for the sake of troubling prisoners from fleeing, in the one-in-a-million chance they escape aboveground from the underground jail.

The east, south, and north were obstructed by the wall and fences, but there was a single gate in the west. A single, short, straight passage stretched out from there, a small plaza still within the maze at its end. It was where the flying dragon we dangled off landed yesterday morning.

I tried to commit a route for escape to memory right before we touched down, but memorization in that short period of time was totally impossible due to the complexity of the maze's structure. However, it appeared that there was no other alternative.

"...Let's break through that maze and get out towards the north or south of the cathedral."

When I said so, Eugeo nodded as well.

"I'm expecting great things from your intuition, Kirito."

"Leave it to me, I've always been good with labyrinths since long ago."

My partner made a contemplative expression when I replied with those words without thinking, so I started walking before he had a chance to ask.

Reaching the west gate after a mere few steps, we first checked the priority of the bronze gate. The priority stated on the window was 35; as expected, it wasn't made from some normal kind of bronze. It might be possible to destroy it after countless strikes with the chain wrapped around my right hand, but

it seemed like that would take more time than climbing it, not to mention how it felt like that would cause the imperial guards (or perhaps integrity knights) to gather here in a flurry.

It happened when I was about to resume walking, resigning myself to challenge the maze as per my initial plan. Eugeo spoke as though he squeezed the words through his throat.

"Wh-What is it!? Did something happen to the fence!?"

"I-It's not the fence... th-these leaves..."

With his eyes wide open, Eugeo whispered while pointing at the completely ordinary leaves of the vines densely coiled around the bronze fence.

"It's my first time seeing them, but there's no mistaking it. These are... «roses», Kirito."

"Roses... Oh... wait, eh, seriously!? All of those growing in this maze, the whole lot of them!?"

I gave a half-hearted response at first, but the roses of this Underworld were not merely pretty flowers. They ranked higher than the «four great sacred flowers» bearing fruits that stored sacred power of high purity: anemones, marigolds, dahlias, and cattleyas. Cultivation of these was prohibited for even nobles and those from the imperial family, let alone commoners, and the few wild ones that grew sparsely in the hills and fields were said to fetch an outrageous price in Centoria's marketplace when found.

There were thousands, no, even tens of thousands of that ludicrously rare plant in this maze alone... The instant that came to mind, I was driven by the urge to pull out and bring along every single one of them, but unfortunately, this world did not have a convenient function known as the item storage.

In contrast to me giving life to my exceedingly realistic conflicts, Eugeo's reaction was calm indeed. Pushing apart the leaves with thorny edges with his fingertips, speaking while peeking inside.

"It doesn't look like the flowers bloomed yet, but the buds are swelling out. With this many around, there should be quite an amount of sacred power released into the air."

Now that he mentioned it, the air within the maze certainly was sweet and pure, with my body feeling as though it was purified with each breath taken. When I took in a greedy, deep breath, Eugeo continued, seemingly annoyed.

"That's not what I'm talking about; we might be able to use fairly high ranking sacred arts right now."

"...Even if you say that, we aren't hurt right now..."

"But we're still lacking something important, aren't we? Our..."

"Ah, aah, that's right... our swords!"

I finally understood what Eugeo was getting at and quietly snapped my fingers.

The class 38 iron chain wrapped around my right arm might be a heartening weapon too, but Eugeo was not versed in the usage of the whip, and quicker repossession of the «Blue Rose Sword» and the «black one» would be far more reassuring. Or rather, recovery of the swords was at the highest order of importance.

The two swords were still somewhere else, carried away by Integrity Knight Alice, but we could get an estimate on their whereabouts through the use of sacred arts at least. I put up my right hand, and then took in a deep breath of air.

"System call!"

I shouted out the words, considered as the opening line for sacred arts by Eugeo and as an activation command for the system manipulation authority by me, in a subdued voice. The five digits on my right hand were covered in a faint violet light, signaling the booted up manipulation authority entering its standby state. Stretching my index finger straight, loosely grasping the remaining four, I started the next command.

"Generate umbra element."

Upon chanting so while imaging a black matte gem, a miniscule sphere of jet-black encircling a bluish-purple phosphorescence appeared at the end of my rigid finger. It was one of the eight «elements» existing in this world, the «umbra element». The degree of difficulty for this art was a little higher, but those boring sacred arts lectures and tests finally served their purpose after coming this far.

The umbra element was the opposite of the «luminous element» Dormitory Supervisor Azurika created to treat Eugeo's right eye yesterday morning, tinged with a negative attribute. It was a dangerous item that would scrape off the entire surrounding space in one go if discharged as it was, but by utilizing its suction property, it could be used in this manner as well.

"Adhere possession. Object ID, WLSS102382. Discharge."

Finishing the chant for the art, the umbra element that floated at my fingertip started to move as though it was sucked in by something. It soared up towards the east as it swayed about, using up all of its energy and vanishing right before it made contact with the cathedral's wall. However, a faint bluish-purple trace remained in the air for a duration of several seconds.

I quickly shifted my sight and stared intensely at where the line drawn by the umbra element led to. Having done the same, Eugeo spoke with slight disappointment.

"Looks like the swords really are inside the cathedral. I was hoping they were stored away somewhere like an outdoor storage shed, though..."

"Still, they don't seem too high up, even if they're inside. The second floor... no, it might be around the third floor? I'm glad they weren't carried to a higher floor than that."

"You're right... I guess. Then, let's make our first objective to sneak into the cathedral from somewhere aside from the main entrance and take back our swords from the third floor."

Although I was secretly worried if it was fine to think of Eugeo, calmly voicing out phrases like 'sneak in' or 'take back' that were used solely by me back at the academy, as dependable, I nodded.

Even if we knew the whereabouts of the swords, our need to clear the maze of roses did not change. I wondered whether there was a sacred art that could show us the route towards the exit, but unfortunately, a command that convenient did not exist—probably.

Upon passing through the bronze gate once again, Eugeo and I first set off towards the plaza in front. It would have been a beautiful sight if the roses coiling about the fences to the left and right were in bloom and the day broke, but the current darkness was our only ally. We killed our footsteps and advanced in a half run under the starlight.

The next gate immediately showed itself. The plaza that served as the flying dragon's landing zone was ahead. I do recall having seen that bench and small fountain, but I couldn't be sure if there was a map of the entire rose garden. No, it's a plaza, so it's definitely there; let it be there.

The moment I was about to pass through another gate slightly smaller than the first while praying thus, a familiar, weak, prickling pain ran through the roots of my bangs. At roughly the same time, Eugeo pulled on my coat from behind.

"Wh-What is it?"

"...Someone's there."

"Wha..."

I immediately prepared myself and focused my eyes in front.

The plaza was in the shape of a rectangle, longer towards the east and west, with the gate we were in at its eastern end. A bronze statue of the god, Terraria, stood on the fountain constructed in the middle, and around it were four benches made from the same bronze as the fences, separated at uniform distances.

And as Eugeo said, there was a person's form on the bench to our right—the northern side.

Although the face couldn't be seen with that long hair in loose waves hiding it, the somewhat thin stature was covered in polished silver armor, with a partially curved long sword on the left of the waist. And from the ends of those two shoulders hung a mantle of a deep shade. I could clearly see that crest with a cross going through a circle embroidered upon the mantle, even from this angle.

Eugeo and I distinctly swallowed our breaths, and then whispered as though we were squeezing the words out.

"In... integrity knight...!"

There was no mistake. Judging from that physique, that hairstyle, and the color of that equipment as well, it wasn't Alice, but I could easily believe that integrity knight was roughly as strong as her. I didn't have a sword either... no, even if I had one, I doubted I could achieve victory unhurt.

Should I escape into the maze from the gates to the north or south right this instant? Or perhaps I should retreat straight behind; I was momentarily at a loss. However, before I could decide on a course of action, a male voice with a refreshing ring to it flowed through the plaza.

"There is no need to stand at such a place; enter, and come forth, prisoners."

The glimmer held aloft in his right hand was, surprisingly enough, a wine glass. Upon looking at it, there was a bottle left on the bench as well.

Having felt the awfully provocative vibes in the knight's tone and gestures, my bad habit kicked in, and I ended up responding rather than escaping.

"Oh now, how about treating us to some of that wine too?"

Without an immediate reply, the integrity knight slowly turned this way, then presented the wine glass for a short moment for us to see.

"Regrettably, I would have to say that this would not suit the mouths of children... and not to mention, criminals, like the two of you. Made in the west empire, it is a hundred and fifty years old. I suppose I could spare you a whiff of its fragrance, however."

That face that smiled pleasantly while the glass swirled was stunningly beautiful, even under the starlight.

An exquisite balance produced by that high nose bridge and those eyebrows with a rugged charm to them, along with a crisp gleam from that pair of long-slitted eyes.

When Eugeo and I were unconsciously awed into silence, the knight uncrossed his legs and nimbly stood up, causing some noise with his armor. He was rather tall—probably a head taller than us both. His *deep purple* mantle and *pale purple* hair both swayed in the night wind.

Having emptied the wine in one gulp, the knight then spoke several unexpected words.

"As expected of Alice-sama, my master; such keen insight. Able to foresee even this one-in-a-million situation of the prisoners escaping."



"A... Alice-sama? M-My master...?"

I repeated in a daze.

The integrity knight gave a serene nod and continued his pompous words.

"To be honest, I never thought it conceivable myself, despite her orders to spend a night here in anticipation of your escape. I planned to admire the rosebuds with a bottle of wine as an accompaniment for this all-night vigil, but to think you would actually appear. —Those, wrapped around your arms, are chains made from spirit-iron forged from the volcanos of the south empire. I do not know how you've cut them, but I believe there is no further room for doubt that you were imprisoned for high treason."

The knight set the wine glass onto the bench while keeping his smile on. Combing up his long hair with his now-emptied right hand, he heightened the emphasis on his words by a mere bit.

"Certainly, I will have you return to the underground jail straight away, but I do believe a slightly severe punishment is in order before that. Of course, the both of you are prepared?"

That thin smile remained there, but an overwhelming hostility flowed out from the lean silhouette of his tall frame, and I restrained myself from backing off a step with all my might. Returning the strength into my stomach, I somehow managed to reply in an ordinary tone.

"If you're saying that, there's no way you believe that we would take that punishment without a fight, right?"

"Hahaha, what liveliness. I heard you were merely chicks, yet to graduate from the academy, but what a sight you've shown me. In light of that bravado, allow me to state my name before I reduce your lives to a drop. —I am Integrity Knight Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one. I may be inexperienced, «summoned» a mere one month ago with no territories under my supervision, but I beg your forgiveness on that matter."

A light breath escaped Eugeo the moment he heard the knight's long-winded speech, but I didn't shift my focus towards my partner's reaction. After all, that speech articulated in that seemingly provocative, beautiful voice contained several crucial points of information.

Firstly, the fact that there was a convention in the names of integrity knights was made clear. Considering how the full name of Integrity Knight Alice was Alice Synthesis Thirty as well, the initial «Alice» or «Eldrie» would be their personal names. The following «Synthesis» would be a name they have in common. Next, the last name was not a name, but a number. It was in English, so Eugeo wouldn't understand, but Alice was likely the thirtieth integrity knight. And Eldrie here was the thirty-first—

Furthermore, he said 'summoned a mere one month ago'. The implications of the word, summon, were unclear, but if Eldrie was the latest human to be appointed as a knight, that would mean there was a total of merely thirty-one integrity knights. Not to mention how those numerous knights were away from the cathedral to guard the various areas of the Human World, so there might only be ten knights or so left in the tower, even on the more side.

But those calculations would turn out to be counting your chickens before whatever it was happened, if we weren't able to break through this novice knight in front of our eyes.

I turned towards Eugeo, standing diagonally left behind me, and whispered.

"Let's fight. I'll face off against him first, so wait for my signal, Eugeo."

"Y-Yeah. But... Kiritto, I..."

"I said it, didn't I, that we can't hesitate any more. Without defeating that guy, there's no way we could get up the cathedral."

"No, I'm not hesitating, I just, his name... —No, let's leave this for later. Understood, but don't overdo it, Kirito."

Eugeo's reaction made me wonder if the plan got through to him, but we couldn't take our own sweet time to discuss. It felt like the unidentified guardian spirit atop my hair breathed a sigh as always, but there would be enough time to escape even after ascertaining the enemy's true ability, probably.

Taking two steps forward and passing through the gate to the plaza, I unwrapped the iron chain from my right hand and gently gripped it. Having seen that, the knight lightly moved his eyebrows.

"I see, although I was wondering what you would do without even a sword, I suppose you intend to make that chain a weapon. In that case, it appears that I would be able to look forward to a battle slightly more befitting of the word, perhaps?"

That voice and that expression were still full of composure even now. Cursing for it to be covered in cold sweat soon enough, I slowly shortened our distance.

This chain had the handicap of not being able to activate secret moves—swords skills, but it could strike from a distance much farther than a sword. If I were to accumulate low damage attacks through hit and run without stopping my feet, there should be a chance of victory.

That was my scheme, but it was smashed into small fragments in the next moment. Knight Eldrie moved his right hand not towards the sword on the left of his waist, but towards his back hidden by that mantle as he continued speaking.

"Well then, I will use not a sword, but this instead."

Quickly drawing out his right hand, the object grasped tightly within it seemed to have been stored at the back of his sword belt; a second weapon—tinged in a pure silver radiance, a slender whip.

I was astonished as the whip loosened itself from Eldrie's right hand before my sight and coiled up above the stone pavement like a snake. Contrasting my unrefined chain, it was gorgeously made from interwoven silver threads. But upon closer examination, sharp thorns sprouted along it in spirals as though it was the stem of a rose, giving off a dangerous gleam as it bore the light of the stars. Getting struck with such a thing wouldn't result in a mere tear in skin.

In addition, the total length of the whip appeared to be four meters at the very least. My chain was 1.2 meter, a difference in reach of over three times. Something like hit and run tactics would not be possible with this.

When I stood still while perspiring cold sweat, Eldrie appeared to have seen through my thoughts as he sharply swung his right hand. The whip winded as though it was alive, striking the stone pavement with a snap.

"Now then... in respect for your resolution in disregarding the Axiom Church and Taboo Index, and even breaking out from the jail, allow me to serve as your opponent with all of my might from the very beginning."

Without even giving me the time to react, Eldrie held his left hand over the whip in his right, and then loudly cried out in a frigid, tense voice.

"System call!"

I could not discern most of the extremely complex ceremony for that art after that.

Like magic in the nostalgic «Alfheim Online», high speed chants—in other words, rapidly speaking out commands continuously—were possible for sacred arts of the Underworld. However, as the speed of the chanting increased, so did the probability of making a mistake in the ceremony.

Within the extents of my knowledge, the person second-most capable in high speed chants was Sortiliena-senpai, while the best was Azurika-sensei. However, Eldrie's chanting was faster than even sensei's. Speaking out a long command not less than thirty words in merely seven or eight seconds, he finished off with a phrase unfamiliar to my ears.

"—*Enhance armament!*"

Enhance was... to strengthen? *Armament* was, erm...

However, I wasn't given the time to flip through the English-Japanese dictionary within my brain. That was as Eldrie casually held aloft his right hand, then swung it down in my direction without a pause.

The distance between us was approximately fifteen meters. Even if that guy's whip was long, it should not reach. However.

Eldrie's whip streaked a silver trace in the air and stretched its length to several times of what it was, as though it was made from an elastic material. Even through my shock, I instinctively lifted the chain above my head with both hands. Immediately following that, a violent impact assailed me, raining down large amounts of bluish-white sparks.

"Kuh...!"

If I were to take this while standing still like this, the chain would be sliced apart. Intuitively knowing that, I bent my knees and warded off the whip by twisting my body towards the right. Jangle! When that intense scraping noise rang out and the whip left the chain, striking the stone pavement, it carved a deep groove there before returning back to the knight's hand.

While feeling cold sweat gush out from my entire body, I let out a deep groan upon seeing the chain.

"Geh..."

It just shaved away an entire portion of this class 38 object, a chain made from that spirit-iron thingy, and nearly sliced through one of its links, didn't it?

Facing the frozen me, the integrity knight offered a faint smile as he spoke.

"My... I thought to slice off one of your ears, but it appears you staved off the attack from my sacred tool, «Frost Scale Whip», despite seeing it for the first time. Perhaps this calls for an apology on making light of you for being a mere student."

Even if I wanted to say something in reply to those words overflowing with tranquility, my mouth stiffened up and couldn't move.

A formidable opponent. And exceedingly so. The one that unconsciously made light of the other was me.

Integrity Knight Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one was a type of enemy I'd never ever had as an opponent before; I understood that now, though belatedly.

The virtual world, Underworld, was an experimental field for Rath at most and strictly speaking, in this battle, my life—not that of Kirito as a swordsman, but of Kirigaya Kazuto as a high school student, was not on the line. Even if my neck was blown away by Eldrie's whip and my Life turned to zero, my actual flesh and blood should not suffer a single injury.

As such, it could not be considered to compare to the death game, SAO, on the fear of battle. The fear when facing off gigantic floor bosses, monsters, or perhaps red players descended into madness; a sensation like a bottomless hole opened up under your feet, walking on a tight rope, was one that I will probably never get the chance to experience again, neither do I have the desire to do so.

However, even if that were to be called a death game, the majority of the players of that world were net gamers without any connection to actual swordsmanship, me included. Those people used the numerical stats and motion assist granted by the system, as well as the meager reaction speed trained over merely one, two years of time as the set of cards in their playing hand for mortal combat.

But Eldrie was different. He accumulated sword practice and arts study over tens of years in this world, training himself to the utmost limits. He was a true swordsman, physically and mentally. Different from both the players of SAO and the monsters operated by the system; if I had to put it into words, he was like the true embodiment of a «rune knight» that appeared in fantasy fiction books.

Possessing skill and sacred arts far more refined than the goblin soldiers at the mountain range at the edge and exuding more willpower than even the head elite swordsmen-in-training, Raio Antinous and Uolo Levanteinn, Eldrie likely surpassed me in each and every aspect of the current me. If I were to continue fighting with a single chain as my weapon, I would unfortunately have a hundred percent chance of losing.

If I were to state a feasible method to struggle out of this situation, it would be...

—That you are not alone.

It felt like someone spoke on my behalf, but I turned to my partner behind as though I was guided there and softly whispered.

"Eugeo. The only point for a chance of victory is the fact that we have two people. I'll stop his whip somehow, so you'll be the one to deal the blow."

However, I couldn't quite hear a reply. When I shifted my sight over my shoulders in doubt, Eugeo's face showed a shade of admiration rather than fear. His mouth finally began moving, but the words he uttered were dyed in nothing but praise.

"...Did you see that art just now, Kirito? Amazing... I've only read it in the ancient books in the library, but there's no mistaking it. That's the «armament full control art»... a super high ranking sacred art to link with the true essence of the weapon through an art ceremony, making its offensive power representative of a miracle from God. That's only to be expected of an integrity knight, huh!"

"Like we're in any situation to appreciate that. ...If that can extend the reach, couldn't that full control thing be used on our chains as well?"

"Impossible, impossible! It is designated as a secret art of the highest grade in the church, after all. Besides, it seems only weapons of sacred tool grade can be targeted by that art."

"Then let's forget about that. We have to do something with the weapons we have on hand. Look, when I manage to hold back that whip somehow, you'll end it. Even if you're not used to using the chain, you can probably swing it straight down at least."

I double-confirmed with Eugeo who finally showed a tense expression.

"Prepare yourself. We'll defeat the strongest force of the church, the integrity knight."

"...I know. I said it, didn't I, that I won't hesitate anymore."

Nodding, Eugeo held the tip of the chain wrapped around his right hand as well and slowly loosened it.

The moment we exchanged glances, the integrity knight showed his usual refreshing smile as he gently rattled the silver whip.

"Are you done with your discussion, prisoners? Now then, how about sparing me a little enjoyment?"

"...Should you really be that laidback as an integrity knight?"

"Naturally, all who oppose the Axiom Church deserve a stern and potent divine punishment... that is the will of the Holiness that is the highest minister. However, I, too, am a knight with pride and it pains me to lash at the unresisting weak. Therefore, I shall hope that the both of you could display some dignity by landing even a single graze upon my armor at the very least."

"...Rather than a graze on your armor, we'll blast off half of your Life and wipe that broad grin off your face."

Concealing the unease spreading through my heart, I boasted. The name, «highest minister», mentioned by Eldrie bothered me, but this was no situation to be pondering over other affairs. Swinging the chain in my right hand once, I quickly thrust my left hand towards Eldrie.

"System call! Generate thermal element!"

Imaging a deep crimson ruby as I shouted the command, flaming points of light sprang to life on my thumb, index finger and middle finger, one on each of them. It was the «thermal element» that served as the source for flame-type offensive arts. I was about to continue and deploy the art ceremony, but Eldrie calmly raised his left hand as well, fifteen meters ahead.

"System call. Generate cryogenic element."

A total of five blue «cryogenic elements» to counter my art were created on all of his fingertips. It was a sudden loss in terms of numbers, but I ignored that and bridged the ceremony.

"Form element, arrow shape!"

Three flame arrows were completed as I pulled my left hand back while chanting, stretching the points of light long and narrow. A shape focused on flight speed and piercing ability. I chanted the final line as fast as I could to deny the enemy time to react.

"Fly straight! Discharge!"

Creating a swirl of flames, the three arrows were aimed at Eldrie and released.

In this world where sword battles were the norm, the reason for the existence of offensive sacred arts was battling military forces from the land of darkness—or so, that old teacher at the academy said. He would probably faint if he knew the magic he taught was used on an integrity knight of all people; with such thoughts in a corner of my mind, I rushed out as well, chasing the flame arrows.

In my path, Eldrie chanted the opposing art ceremony in a single breath.

"Form element, bird shape. Counter thermal object, discharge!"

The five blue points of light became small birds—a shape suitable for homing in on targets—and took off simultaneously. In terms of projectile speed, my arrows were higher, but the ice birds won in numbers. Although they slipped past two of them, the remaining three intercepted the flame arrows one after another, scattering both explosive flames and ice crystals, offsetting and extinguishing each other. The wine glass on the bench was blown away by the explosion's impact, smashing into fragments onto the stone pavement.

Under the cover of the flashy light effects, I closed in towards Eldrie in a single spurt. With another two steps... another one step, he'll be within the chain's reach—

The knight's right hand suddenly moved and the snake-like silver whip sprang up from the ground. The range advantage from that armament full control thing wouldn't matter at this distance. I tried my best to predict the trajectory of the whip as it attacked from my right in an arc, bending my body to dodge while taking that final step. —But.

"—!?"

I swallowed my breath the moment I saw it. Didn't Eldrie's whip just split into two, with the newly born silver snake tracing out an even sharper angle as it hunted me down?

I was unable to cope with that attack, having seen it at a distance of several centimeters, and the whip dealt a heavy blow to my chest. Tossed onto the stone pavement, a raspy scream escaped from me.

"Guh...!"

I thought I was prepared, but a blow from the metal whip with countless thorns growing over it hurt enough to make my eyes spin. Looking with my teeth clenched, the chest portion of my black uniform was completely torn off along with my undershirt and a straight, deep red scar ran over the exposed skin. A great number of blood drops welled up all at once, drawing parallel lines as they flowed down.

Eldrie laughed gaily, looking down at me miserably fallen onto my rear.

"Hahaha, a little trick like that has no effect on this Frost Scale Whip. In its full control state, its reach can extend up to fifty mel while splitting into a maximum of seven. You might achieve something if you had eight throwing themselves upon me, however."

I had absolutely no composure left to get irritated at his calm and composed mannerisms. It was my first time tasting this much pain ever since my shoulder was cut by that goblin leader two years ago.

I always knew that this low pain resistance of mine was one of my major weaknesses, but in the Sword Mastery Academy, where the usage of the stopping-before-contact rule was the norm, I rarely ever had the opportunity to get used to pain. There's a limit to how worthless I could get, having said that I would do something grand like stopping the whip at the risk of my life.

"Fm, could it have been an overestimation on my part after all? Then I shall grant you some pity at least, and sever your consciousness in one smooth stroke."

Proclaiming so, Eldrie lightly rustled the silver whip and took a step forward.

In that instant, Eugeo, who advanced close by unnoticed, leapt out from the shadow of the fountain with a frantic expression.

"Uryaaa!"

Letting out a rare loud yell, he swung down the chain in his right hand. It was a blow that I had no qualms with, considering it was the first time he was using that weapon, and a surprise attack as well—but still, it was not enough to penetrate the knight's guard. Eldrie's right hand flashed so fast it became a blur, splitting the pure silver whip into two once again while airborne. One repelled the chain while the other assailed Eugeo. He was struck away soundly on the chest and before Eugeo could even scream out, he fell into the fountain, spouting out a large spray.

The sharp pain tormenting me showed no sign of subsiding, but I couldn't waste the chance created by the attack Eugeo risked his life for. The instant I felt more than half of Eldrie's attention leave me, I roused my upper body and let loose the object I gripped within my right hand several seconds ago towards the knight's face.

Unlike Aincrad and Alfheim, most of the objects in this world would not vanish immediately after being broken. They started up a new count of Life as shards, fragments, or perhaps carcasses.

The broken part had its Life, or in another word, durability, reduced at a speed far quicker than before, and it disappeared for good without a trace upon that reaching zero. But still, there was a delay of several minutes at the very least, before utter annihilation.

Even if that was something insignificant, like a shard from a broken wine glass.

The glass fragment I threw pierced through the pre-daybreak darkness and flew towards Eldrie's left eye. In addition, it should barely reflect any of the starlight as I rubbed it against the blood that flowed from my chest injury right before throwing it.

It probably wouldn't even take a tenth of a second for the fragment to hit him after entering his sight. And yet, the knight turned his face to the right with his monstrous reaction speed, avoiding a direct hit at his eyeball. After making a scratch near his left cheekbone, the glass shard left behind only a shallow injury as it flew off into the darkness.

"Uoh!!"

Before Eldrie turned back to me, I jumped up with all my strength from a crouch.

Kicking off the ground twice, I entered the range required by the chain in my right hand. With the chain raised high as though it was carried upon my left shoulder. Having recovered from his moment of agitation, Eldrie pulled back his right hand and the whip that twisted in midair after hitting Eugeo moved out to intercept me.

Even if I were to continue swinging down the chain simplistically, it would probably clash against the whip at best or fail to break through the splitting whip's guard, making me the only one to receive a hard blow again at worst. However, I shook off my fear and shifted the focus of my widely opened eyes from the glittering end of the whip to Eldrie's background—the fountain Eugeo fell into.

Shifting your sight away from an opponent during combat was a major prohibition in each and every style taught by the Sword Mastery Academy. Yes, it could be said to be a sort of «taboo». Hence, the swordsmen of this world will never ever do it. Even integrity knights shouldn't be an exception to this rule.

"Nuh...!"

And so, Eldrie let out a low growl as he averted his focus from me, even if it was for a mere instant. He felt that Eugeo who was just knocked down into the fountain had immediately gotten up and started a counterattack. However, that was, of course, an act of deceit through the movement of my eyes with the current circumstances. No matter how sturdy Eugeo was, even he couldn't get up that easily after a blow from a sacred tool.

The pure silver whip jolted slightly from its trajectory in midair, reflecting Eldrie's bewilderment. It passed by several millimeters above my chain without colliding. The reason why I attacked from this somewhat difficult posture of swinging the chain overhead while slanting to the left was for it to go parallel to the whip's trajectory, in a bid to reduce the odds of interception. A method I grasped after having my wooden sword utterly entangled by Liena-senpai's whip.

However, this will not work again. This was the unequivocal final chance.

"Zeiaaaaa——!!"

I used my entire body to swing down the spirit-iron chain with all the fervor in my mind and body.

My aim was a single place out of the knight's whole body: his head, unprotected by the solid silver armor. I do not know whether it was for the sake of drinking wine or if he looked down on us students, but I wasn't nice enough to ignore this opening of not having a helmet equipped. If the heavy and solid

chain were to make a direct hit on his unarmored head, he should lose his consciousness, even if he was an integrity knight—

But. Yet again, Eldrie displayed ability and resolution exceeding that of my expectations.

Stretching his left hand out like lightning, he received the chain at a part near its tip, not with the back of his hand that was protected by a gauntlet, but with what peeked out from it: his palm covered by a thin leather glove.

If he used the back of his hand, the chain would rotate with that as a fulcrum and its tip should seize the knight's head, even if it lost a little power. Hence, Eldrie's choice was the right one—but the offensive power of a class 38 iron chain wasn't something a single piece of thin leather could soak up.

"Gu.....!"

A restrained moan escaped from the knight the moment he caught the chain. My ears could clearly perceive the sound of several of the bones in his left hand breaking all at once. He would not be able to use that left hand for a while and neither would he throw the sacred tool called «Frost Scale Whip» or something in his right hand onto the ground.

Jumping at him and bringing this into a scuffle. I was initiated in the Serlut-style of «martial arts» by Liena-senpai. Although those gentle techniques focused on locking and choking instead of attacking, that could be considered more effective on my heavily armored enemy.

"Not yet!"

Crying out, I grabbed Eldrie's injured left arm with my empty left hand and stepped in.

"What!"

However. Even if he was the newest integrity knight at number thirty-one, his actions exceeded my predictions yet again.

The left hand that ought to have been broken gripped the chain with intensity and he pulled with all the might he could muster. The start of the chain was connected to the iron ring on my right hand, so my sense of balance was destroyed as I staggered, being forced to spin towards the other direction. I desperately tried to regain my footing, but a vehement yell surged out from Eldrie once again—

"Nuuh!!"

My entire body seemed like it was about to spin about. If I left the situation as it was, I would be placed out of the chain's range while within the whip's. And that guy would never permit me to approach ever again.

I instinctively changed the target of my left hand and grasped the whip held in Eldrie's right hand, instead of his left arm. The «Frost Scale Whip» possessed a countless number of sharp thorns, but there weren't any until about one and a half meter from the grip. I wrapped that part around my arm, making it hard to remove.

With this, as long as Eldrie didn't let go of both the whip in his right hand and the chain in his left, he wouldn't gain any distance from me. Rather, if he were to release only the chain in his left hand, that would only serve to allow me to attack as much as I wanted. The other party probably realized that as well, holding the chain tight once again with his broken left hand.

Eldrie and I were fixed at a short distance of one meter due to those two: the silver whip and the iron chain.

It must be outrageously painful to hold on to the chain with his left hand, but the knight showed practically none of it on his face, whispering in a composed tone even now.

"...It appears that I would have to retract that opinion about overestimating you. I certainly did not think you could inflict this amount of damage upon myself."

"...Well, thanks."

I was actually about to say more in rebuttal, but I didn't want to turn the topic towards the state of our wounds. After all, when comparing Eldrie's fractured left hand and the gash on my chest, the one with a higher rate of Life reduction was mine, with my blood still flowing out. If that guy were to notice, he would probably come up with the strategy of continuing with this deadlock and waiting for my strength to fade.

...No, perhaps he had already noticed. The knight moved his mouth once again with a faint smile.

But the subject spoken of in his words was somewhat unusual for the sake of stalling for time.

"But still, I certainly do draw a curious feeling of déjà vu from that technique... that style of combat."

"Oh now... But that wouldn't be strange or anything. Couldn't you have fought with a swordsman using the Serlut-style like me before?"

"Fm, that would be inconceivable, prisoner. As I have mentioned, I was summoned into this Human World as an integrity knight a mere one month ago."

".....By summon, you mean..."

Just as the conversation was about to proceed, I finally noticed that sound. Or to be accurate, the change in rhythm of a sound I had always been listening to, even now.

A stone statue of Terraria, the god of the land, stood in the middle of the fountain behind Eldrie. The small stream that flowed from the bottle held by the statue had always made a graceful sound as it cascaded into the pond below, but that now sounded like a murmur. This—was a signal. One from my partner, for me.

Eldrie would definitely notice straight away. I would have to take immediate action even while continuing this conversation.

"...You make it sound as though someone called you out into this Human World."

Don't hear it; I took action, rather than speaking it out. That said, I couldn't exactly release the «Frost Scale Whip» entwined around my left hand. There was but one thing I could do; to grip the chain in my right hand—

And pull it back with all my strength!

In response to my sudden movement, Eldrie pulled the chain back in turn. Cling! The chain strained and immediately following that, was torn into two near its middle. The portion deeply whittled away by the whip earlier finally broke under the strain.

"Wha..."

A surprised voice escaped from Eldrie as expected and it occurred next, the instant his posture was crippled.

The one who leapt out from the fountain behind him with a splash was, of course, Eugeo. Getting back on his feet after the pain from the heavy blow to his chest, he was waiting for the chance for an

ambush below the small stream that fell into the fountain. The change in the sound of the stream was due to him receiving the water current onto his back.

"Ryaaa!!"

Eugeo swung the chain in his right hand down towards Eldrie's unarmored head while sprinkling drops of water from his entire body.

It was half a second before, when that short verse... no, command, escaped from the knight's mouth.

"Release recollection."

I truly couldn't understand it at all, this time round. But what happened seemed highly impossible considering the shortness of the command, a phenomenon that greatly exceeded the boundaries of sacred arts.

The pure silver whip held tightly in my left hand that Eldrie should neither be able to push nor pull suddenly glowed with a dazzling sheen. Its body was trembling violently in that state as though it turned alive—it stretched out with impetuous vigor.

The «Frost Scale Whip» that became a glittering snake drew a beautiful arc as it flew above Eldrie's and my heads and swooped down at the chain held by Eugeo. No, calling it a snake wasn't done metaphorically any longer. I clearly saw those eyes, red like rubies, and that jaw opened wide at the end of the whip.

Biting the end of the chain, the snake pulled Eugeo into the air with it, throwing him onto the stone pavement right beside me. Falling onto his back, Eugeo gave a short groan. Although the damage done on him was probably higher than what was dealt on me, along with that chest injury he received earlier, my partner still tried to get up, determined.



However, the sharp point of a sword grazed his wet, flaxen forelocks a moment before he could.

Recovered from his staggering, Eldrie threw the torn chain aside and drew the sword on the left of his waist with his freed left hand, thrusting it at Eugeo. The sword was slender yet glazed in a dignified radiance characteristic of sharp swords and despite how it should have been maddeningly painful just holding onto the sword with that broken hand, the knight merely showed a bit of severity near his brow.

The silver snake that protected its master of its own will—I couldn't see any other possibilities—contracted as it slithered and returned to being a mute whip once again at the end of my left hand. Apparently, the miracle brought about by that mysterious «*release recollection*» command had a rather short effect duration.

And so, it was a stalemate once again.

Eldrie sealed my left hand away with the whip. I had half of the chain broken off. And Eugeo had his movement sealed with a sword thrust before him. The initiative seemed to lie with Eldrie who succeeded in drawing his sword, but I dare say that he wouldn't be able to do a strong slash with that hand.

A brief period of silence descended upon a section of the piercing cold rose garden right before the break of dawn.

The first to speak this time was Eldrie yet again.

"...Alice-sama was justified in her request for vigilance. Those attacks had no style or anything of that sort... and that was how you surpassed my predictions. I certainly did not think that I would even have to resort to the secret move of «unlocking those memories»."

"Memories...?"

After repeating that in a soft voice, I finally realized those words were the meaning of the mysterious command earlier.

Release was to unlock and *recollection* was the word for memories. In other words, a ceremony to unlock the memories of a weapon... I suppose?

A weapon's memories. I felt like I had heard that phrase somewhere recently and thought to search through my own memories. However, Eugeo verbalized several unexpected words with a voice and face filled with admiration for some reason before I could.

"You, too... You're just as I expected, integrity knight-dono."

"Th-This isn't any time or place to get all choked up. ...What did you mean by expected?"

I unintentionally replied with a question even though I meant to retort at those words that made it seem as though he knew this knight from the past.

"I thought I heard that name somewhere ever since the start. I finally recalled a moment ago. You see, Kirito, this person is—**the number one representative swordsman of the Norlangarth North Empire this year. And the champion of the Four Empires Unity Tournament, Eldrie Woolsburg!**"

"Wha....."

What did you say; I stared at the face of the integrity knight a meter and a half in front of me once again.

Number one representative of the North Empire. So, in other words, he was the champion of the Empire Swordsmanship Tournament held in the last third of the third month this year. The representative from the Imperial Knight Order who defeated Sortiliena-senpai, a representative from

the Sword Mastery Academy, in the first match and Uolo Levanteinn in the second. He was the one who won through the Four Empires Unity Tournament held in the first third of the fourth month with overwhelming sword strength, obtaining the honor of being the strongest swordsman in the Human World this year and invited to the Central Cathedral—or so I heard.

Come to think of it, I didn't even know the name of that hero. Neither television nor radio existed in this world and the internet was completely out of the question, with the only thing that could be labeled as news media being the primeval weekly wall newspaper, so I inadvertently found going to the bulletin board at the main academy building to be troublesome, but it seems Eugeo made it a point to check it out each week.

"Diligent, aren't you..."

I stopped my thoughts, flustered, after whispering that sort of thought out loud unintentionally. If it was as Eugeo said, that the integrity knight before my eyes, Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one, was the Unity Tournament champion, Eldrie Woolsburg, wouldn't that highlight some peculiarities in his behavior?

I'm sure Eldrie said this a mere few minutes ago. That he was 'summoned into this Human World as an integrity knight a mere one month ago'. I would understand if he said that he was appointed as an integrity knight, but... the way he said it was as though.....

".....What, did you say?"

Hearing that sudden, hoarse voice, I returned my vision from my partner on my right, towards the knight in front.

Eldrie—had even more color fade away from his already-pale skin, his purple eyes now ashen and opened extremely wide, as though he received some sort of incredible shock without our notice. The shade of blood in his quivering lips drained out and words were forced out from them.

"I am... the North Empire, representative swordsman...? Eldrie... Woolsburg...?"

Eugeo was surprised with his mouth agape at that unexpected reaction as well, but immediately nodded and continued.

"Ye... yes, that's right. I'm sure that was written in the newspaper last month. A handsome man with purple hair... winning every match in a single round with an extraordinarily elegant swordsmanship style..."

"No... I am... I am, the integrity knight, Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-one! I... don't know anyone of the name, Woolsburg...!"

"B-But..."

Forgetting that we were still in the midst of battle as well, I went for it.

"Still, it's not like you've been an integrity knight ever since you were born. Wasn't that your name before you were appointed as a knight...?"

"I don't know! I... I don't know!!"

Messing up his hair as he shouted, Eldrie's face became increasingly pale, a bizarre light visible in his eyes.

"I... I'd... taken up the invitation from the highest minister, Administrator-sama... summoned to this land from the Celestial World as an integrity knight and..."

His speech stopped thus—

A phenomenon that bewildered Eugeo and me even further had occurred.

A beam of purple light suddenly welled out from the exact center of Eldrie's smooth forehead.

"Gu... uh..."

Strength left Eldrie's right hand as he moaned and I stared at the knight's forehead, even forgetting about snatching away the whip. The shiny object was a small, inverted triangular mark. No, it wasn't simply a symbol. It was gradually rising out from the knight's forehead. The crystal-like, transparent, triangular prism scattered dazzling light as it protruded out centimeter by centimeter.

Fine lines of light ran freely within the triangular prism. When the wedge outside reached as far as five centimeters, the whip and sword finally slipped off Eldrie's two hands onto the stone pavement.

The knight took a step or two back with blank eyes, without even an attempt to look at us, and then knelt down onto the stone pavement like a puppet with its strings cut. The brilliance of the crystal prism from his forehead heightened further and I could even hear a mysterious chiming sound.

It was time to take action. —That's what I thought, but I couldn't make an immediate decision on what exactly it was that I should be doing.

It would be easy to attack. If I were to pick the knight's sword from the ground and slash at his unarmored neck, not only could I render him powerless, I could take his life away.

It was also possible to flee as fast as we could. In the worst case scenario, if it were to serve as an impetus for the knight's consciousness to return, I expect he would go on the offensive for real this time round. Surprise attacks wouldn't work anymore in that situation and we might be the ones to lose all of our Lives.

Lastly, there was also the choice to watch over the outcome as we were doing now, though that would be the most risky.

This phenomenon happening before our very eyes was unmistakably related to the core of the secrets to integrity knights... and thus, the Axiom Church. Why did Alice lose her memories and obtain a different personality? The meaning behind the word, summon, that Eldrie used? If we were to watch this phenomenon to the end with our own eyes, we might find out the explanations behind those riddles.

At any rate, Eugeo wouldn't agree with slashing at Eldrie while he couldn't resist. And even if we were to run, it was no simple matter to escape this rose garden maze.

In that case, let's continue watching while maintaining our vigilance. Concluding so, I crept up to the kneeling knight, before that happened.

Just when I thought the light from the shining triangular prism that protruded a whole five centimeters from his forehead would fade away as it flickered, it reversed and started to sink back into his forehead.

"Ugh..."

I instinctively bit my lips. After all, I was anticipating that something would definitely happen when the triangular prism was entirely drawn out.

"Eldrie! Eldrie Woolsburg!"

When I shouted out, the crystal paused for a single moment, but immediately began moving once more. His previous name was not enough to bring this phenomenon to its conclusion. A more decisive «memory» was necessary.

I turned towards my partner with his eyes open wide at my side and shouted in a subdued voice with that hunch in mind.

"Eugeo, don't you have anything else on Eldrie!? Anything's fine, make this guy recall more of his memories!"

"E-Erm..."

He made a rigid frown for a moment, but Eugeo immediately nodded.

"Eldrie! You're the son of the Imperial Knight Order's general, Eschdol Woolsburg! Your mother's name was... let's see... Almera, yes, her name was Almera!"

"....."

The blank-faced integrity knight's lips slightly quivered in that instant.

"Al... me... ra....."

A frail voice escaped from him while the light from the triangular prism grew in intensity. However, what shocked me further were the large drops of tears, silently overflowing from the knight's widely opened eyes. And that exceedingly weak voice came once again.

".....Mo... the..... er....."

"That's right... remember, all of it!"

I tried to take another step closer as I shouted.

However, I could not. Don! That heavy impact made the ground tremble and I pitched forward.

I was only conscious of the pain, intense enough to blind my eyes, after I looked down and noticed a single arrow pierced deeply into my right foot.

"Guah!"

Unable to withstand it, I blurted out a short scream. Grabbing hold of the bronze-colored arrow with both hands while gasping and pulling with all my might, I almost lost consciousness while assailed by a pain several times that of earlier, but held it down with my teeth clenched.

"Kirito! A-Are you..."

I grasped the chain that hung from Eugeo's right arm without hearing those words to the end and then pulled it with all my strength.

Whoosh, don! Those noises rang out and two arrows pierced through the place Eugeo was a moment ago. I looked up at the sky while jumping aside even further with the chain still in my hand.

I saw a single flying dragon slowly circling about against the backdrop of the starry sky, with signs of the dawn approaching without us having noticed. I could somehow discern a human figure sitting atop the saddle on its back if I were to concentrate. There was no mistake that it was an integrity knight—but that was astoundingly precise shooting, seeing as the other party was targeting us with a bow while riding a flying dragon, not to mention the distance.

Without even allowing me the time to consider that, the saddled knight drew a gigantic bow. I frantically kicked off the ground with my injured right foot. Two arrows pierced into the stone pavement in front of my eyes without a moment's delay.

"Th-This is bad."

I spluttered while grasping Eugeo's chain. It was the first time I was under attack by bow and arrow in this world. Even the Walking Tactics Manual, Sortiliena-senpai, only went to the extent of using throwing knives as a projectile weapon, so I figured that long range attacks didn't suit the nature of swordsmen in the Underworld, but it appeared that anything goes for integrity knights.

I couldn't quite take my eyes off the flying dragon, so I sketched out the surroundings in my mind, but there wasn't a single place that could shelter both of our bodies. Even if we were to dive into the rose thicket twining about the bronze fences, we probably wouldn't be able to hide ourselves entirely. Aside from that, there was only—

"No choice but to run! Run if you can dodge the next arrow!"

Whispering so after turning to Eugeo, my entire body tensed up in preparation for the arrow.

However, the new integrity knight ceased fire for the time being and the flying dragon began to circle as it descended. A booming voice ran through the fountain plaza several seconds later.

"Criminals, keep your distance from Integrity Knight Thirty-one!"

Upon taking a glimpse at Eldrie instinctively, the triangular prism that almost fell out from him after all our trouble was returning into his forehead.

"I can spare you forgiveness no longer, for your deplorable attempts at soliciting a venerable integrity knight into depravity! I will shoot through your four limbs and send you back into jail!"

A faint beam of dawn light shone in from the east at that time, illuminating the flying dragon in the sky. The straddling integrity knight was entirely covered in silver, heavy armor, much like Eldrie's, and carrying a gigantic longbow of red steel in the left hand. That was likely a sacred tool just like the «Frost Scale Whip». We would only know whether that formidable precise shooting was due to the «full control art» or a display of the knight's true ability from now on.

The hulking knight spoke no more and nocked four arrows onto the red bow at the same time.

"Ru... run!"

It was no longer possible to dodge the shots after confirming them via sight with only this much distance. I dashed with all my might while holding onto Eugeo's chain. I could feel an intense pain from the injuries on my chest and right foot with each step, but I couldn't simply stop there. Eugeo followed behind with his audible, frantic breathing.

I did think about fleeing back to the underground jail we were first in, but even if we could avoid the shots that way, it was no solution to the problem at hand. I ran towards the gate south of the plaza, knowing it would be the end if we collided into a dead-end within the maze.

Before we could take much more than a few steps, multiple loud thuds repeatedly rang out from behind.

"Uowaah!"

Without being sure whether my howl was a scream or a war cry, I placed my entire focus into running. Although the fences that stood at both sides of the passage hid us depending on the angle, we couldn't help but show ourselves at crossroads and such and several arrows would immediately flood into our surroundings.

"How many arrows does that knight have!"

Shouting out in irritation and confusion, Eugeo who ran behind dependably answered.

"It went over thirty after the one earlier, that's amazing!"

"This isn't some half-baked MMO... sorry, ignore that!"

It seemed I had lost my sense of direction. But I could feel a pull near my forelocks whenever we approached a junction for some reason, so I turned right or left according to that while continuing sprinting with all I got. It looked like we had somehow maintained a constant distance from the flying dragon for now, but there was nothing more we could do if we ran into a dead-end even once—

It had nothing to do with the negative thoughts and such that ran through my mind, but as I turned to the left at the nth fork, the effect of the mysterious divine protection finally wore out. The road ended as a heartless dead-end ten meters ahead.

Now that it came to this, there was no other way than to break through the metal fence with the chain on my right hand, reduced to half of its length after it broke, but its priority was close to that of the chain as I had checked earlier. The chance of it breaking with a single hit was exceedingly low.

However, there was already no other choice. Gathering my resolve, I was about to leave it all to fate and swing my right hand when it happened.

"Oi, scoot hither!"

Hearing that voice that came from nowhere, I collapsed as my stream of thoughts ceased in that instant. After all, in contrast to the manner of speech characteristic of the elderly in using 'scoot hither', the voice was clearly that of a young girl.

When I ran my sight through my surroundings while decelerating, I saw an unnoticed door in the right side of the fence in front. The one who beckoned with her hand from there while her face peeked through was someone who could be described as nothing but a girl of around ten years old as expected, wearing a large black hat.

The small, round spectacles on her nose glittered in the light and the girl vanished through other side of the door. I was momentarily at a loss whether it was a trap or not. But a whole bunch of my forelocks were pulled forward with much strength at that time. As if it was scolding me, 'What are you doing, hurry up and get in!'.

Eugeo and I plunged into the darkness beyond the door in a feverish daze.

Part 3

Beyond the door was a space with breadth and depth defying my expectations

"Waaaah!?"

I somersaulted forward through the air thrice while that shameful scream escaped from me. Right after that, I fell on my back on a slightly elastic ground. A huge bounce later, I thumped onto the ground with my rear-end this time round.

Eugeo immediately fell beside me in a similar manner. We both shook our heads countless times and then glanced around the area upon regaining our sense of balance.

".....What?"

Eugeo's unusual utterance was perfectly understandable. We should have just passed through an open door in that rose garden fence. As such, nothing but that maze earlier could have been on its other side.

However, the walls and ceiling surrounding the hallway we now sat at were covered in antiquated wooden boarding with the floor wooden as well. The elasticity I felt when I fell was due to the planks below. Our Lives would have reduced a lot if it was paved in stone like in the rose garden.

The hallway continued on for another ten meters or so with a warm orange light flickering at its end. Even the surrounding air changed from the chilly and damp night air we felt just a moment ago to one filled with a dry smell reminiscent of timeworn paper.

Just where was this... or so I thought, before I heard a metallic crunch from above, behind me. A tremendously steep staircase came into my sight upon turning around, with a small door and a short human form visible at its top.

I forgot about even my whip-struck chest and arrow-pierced right foot, got up unsteadily and carefully ascended the wooden staircase. The door within my vision should have been formed by a bronze grate before we passed through it, but it was now wooden like the walls and floor. However, in contrast with the antiquated hallway, the door alone was made from brand new plain wood for some reason.

Three steps away from the top, the shadow with its back to us swiftly raised its right hand as a command to me. That hand held an excessively huge bunch of keys made from brass, giving the impression that it had just pulled them from the door's keyhole that was just as large. I believe that metallic noise several seconds ago was this person locking up the door.

"...Erm..."

'Where is this place and who are you?', I noticed the noise the moment I was about to ask that question. The noise of some small and rigid being creeping about, rustling and creaking, on the immediate other side of the locked door. Goosebumps stood up on the skin of my arms.

"...Done found out, huh. This *backdoor's* bugged out."

The mysterious person murmured, hushed, and waved its right hand once again as if to urge me forward. I reluctantly postponed my question and descended all the way to the hallway yet again. Eugeo was already on his feet when I returned to his side, and upon turning about, that mysterious person was just about to complete the descent.

As there wasn't any sort of illumination aside from the light from the end of the hallway faintly shining this way around us, I couldn't make out much more than a silhouette. A greatly inflated hat upon the head and a magician-like robe covering that small frame. The bunch of keys in its right hand and a staff longer than its own height in the left.

That staff—that *magic staff* of sorts turned towards us and swung once, as if to urge us on. And simultaneously, a voice.

"Goodness, quit your dilly-dallying and get in! The place's going down with the passage!"

This couldn't be anything but a young girl as I thought, but she somehow exuded more of an aura of solemnity than Azurika-sensei from the Sword Mastery Academy, and Eugeo and I walked towards the light in a panic. Getting out of the short passage in short order, we exited into a queer location.

It was a considerably wide, square-shaped room. Many lamps were mounted onto the wall, with the warmly-tinted flames flickering away. There was nothing else that could be termed furniture, with only a single thick, wooden door visible on the opposing wall.

More than ten hallways like the one we came through were lined up on the other three walls. Judging from a peek at the one right next to us, I saw a staircase and small door at its end as expected.

As Eugeo and I glanced through our surroundings, the robed girl who followed behind swiveled and raised the staff towards the hallway.

"There."

That cute—or perhaps, elderly yell accompanied a quick wave.

I figured there wouldn't be any more surprises in store, but the next phenomenon dumbfounded us yet again. The wallboards on the left and right were just pushed out one after another from the side furthest from us as they made banging noises, and caused tremors as they joined together, didn't they?

The ten-meter-long hallway was shut away in mere seconds and at the end, only a plain wall remained after the boards that protruded from the top, bottom, left and right met. There was no trace of the hallway there a moment ago, not even a single dent.

Even if it was a sacred art, it had to be a considerably large-scale, high ranking one. A long ceremony recital and a high system access authority should be necessary to move the combined mass of all those objects. The surprising part was that the mysterious girl executed all of that with a single yell going, "There". In the first place, she didn't even utter a single syllable of 'system call'. Not to mention how that phrase had to precede each and every sacred art without exception, according to the academy's teachings.

"Hmph."

The girl made a soft sigh through her nose and upon thrusting the staff into the ground as though she was utterly used to this sort of situation, she finally turned to us.

Taking another look at her in the ample lighting, she appeared to be a young, doll-like, cute girl. The black robe with a velvet-like luster and the large hat made from the same material made her look more like an elderly scholar than a magician, but the chestnut, curly hair peeking from the edges of her hat and that milky skin gave off a youthful radiance.

The girl's most striking feature was her eyes. Those eyes, fringed by long eyelashes, beyond those round glasses daintily worn on her nose were brown like her hair, but they somehow gave an overwhelming presence of knowledge and wisdom. Simply looking at those eyes made one feel as though they were sucked into a depth with no definite end. It was utterly impossible to predict what she was thinking through them.

Anyway— This girl certainly did save us from the integrity knight's assault, so let's express some gratitude, I thought as I lowered my head.

"Err... thanks for saving us."

"I've yet to see if you lot are worth the whole kerfuffle, though."

This must be what it meant to be curt. I had learnt that it was better to leave negotiations with unfamiliar faces to Eugeo from the experiences we had while travelling, so I jabbed him into bearing the brunt of the conversation with my elbow.

Urged forward, Eugeo gave a bow with his hair still wet and then started off with a self-introduction.

"Well... Nice to meet you, my name is Eugeo and this is Kirito. Thank you very much for your assistance. Err... do you live in this room?"

It seems my partner was rather muddled up as well. The girl made a stunned expression, and then raised her pince-nez glasses before she replied.

"How could that even possibly be the case now. ...Come."

Making a noise with the bottom end of the staff, she turned towards the large door on the wall in front and began walking. We followed behind in a fluster, saw the door open up by itself with a single swing from the staff, and fulfilled our duty of being surprised yet again.

Having passed through the door after the girl, Eugeo and I chalked up another stroke to the number of times we were shocked ever since we entered this enigmatic place and stood in amazement.

It was an absurd spectacle. If I were to express it in a single term—super-humongous-library-room.

The world that comprised entirely of «bookshelves and books» spread out infinitely. The overall space was shaped as a cylinder, but many layers of staircases and passages were built on the walls' surfaces, with myriads upon myriads of bookshelves lined up on one side or both. The distance between the floor we stood at now and the canopy on the other side of the long gallery that stretched out like a multi-story maze was easily forty meters at least. It would probably correspond to a ten-story building in the real world. I couldn't even begin to estimate the total number of books stowed away in the shelves.

No matter how I thought about it, there wasn't a building capable of containing this library room in that rose garden. While looking up at the canopy sunk in a faint darkness, I asked in a hoarse voice.

"Is... is this already inside the Central Cathedral?"

"You could say that, but that's not entirely true."

I realized the girl's voice had a faintly satisfied tone in it.

"As I've purged that original door, this Great Library Room does exist within the cathedral, yet it's not like every other person is able to enter. Not without an invitation from me, that is."

"Great... Library Room...?"

Eugeo murmured, still dumbfounded as he looked around.

"Yes. This place stores the records of all history since the creation of this world, the structural formulae of all that exist, and all of those *system commands* you lot name sacred arts."

.....*System commands*, she says!?

I couldn't immediately believe what my own ears had heard and stared fixedly on the girl's face. Words escaped from my half-open lips, partly by themselves.

"Wh... who exactly... are you?"

The girl then, with a smile that practically said that she understood the shock I felt and the reason behind it, stated her name.

"My name is «Cardinal». I was the one who once regulated the world and now serve as the one and only librarian of this Great Library Room."

—*Cardinal*.

As far as I knew, that name held three different meanings.

The first, a high ranking position of the Catholic Church in the real world. They were called *suukikyou* in Japanese.

Second, the name of a bird in the Fringillidae family^[4]. *Shuujyoukoukanchou* in Japanese, feathers grew over its entire body, scarlet like a Catholic cardinal's miter, the source of its name.

And the third—the highly functional autonomous program developed by Kayaba Akihiko for administrating VRMMO games, the «Cardinal System». Its first version was used in SAO, superbly regulating the balance behind the generation of currency, items and monsters within Aincrad, wrapping us players around its little finger.

Kayaba scanned his own brain with a STL prototype and died after SAO was cleared, but he shrunk the Cardinal System and compiled «The Seed», a development support package for the generic VRMMO before that.

The Seed was sent to bud far and wide on the internet by the will of the replicated thoughts program left behind by Kayaba in digital space and ended up managing Gun Gale Online and many other games. I had a hand in the free redistribution for The Seed as well and pondered on the digital Kayaba's true motive for the longest time, but couldn't reach a satisfying conclusion in the end. I doubt that man of all people would make a development environment completely free for merely a reason like atoning for the SAO incident, but...

At any rate, was the girl in front of my eyes right now the Cardinal System in a human form?

It was perfectly possible that she was an artificial fluctlight with a high position in the Axiom Church with the name, «Cardinal». But the girl certainly said that she was once «the one who regulated» the world. Not one who led or ruled, but one who regulated, Cardinal.

But why was the Cardinal System in this world? Was the Underworld put together by utilizing The Seed? Even if that was so, why would the regulation system that should work entirely in the background, the «unseen hand of God», assume a human form? Unlike «Yui», the counseling program, Cardinal should not have any ability to converse with players itself.

As I stood still, toying with the endless questions I had, Eugeo spoke in a quivering voice by my side, perhaps struck with surprise in his own way too.

"All... history...? The chronicles of the founding of the four empires are all here...?"

"That's not all to it. Even the history of the world's creation from when the gods, Stacia and Vector, divided it into the Human World and the Dark Territory are recorded here."

Eugeo the history lover made a face as though he was about to swoon while swaying left and right at the girl's words. The mysterious girl possessing the name, Cardinal, pushed the glasses on her nose up with a somewhat mischievous smile.

"My story will take some time, so how about some food and rest before that? If you wish, you may even read the books on those shelves. Whichever you like, as many as you like."

There; and with a wave of her staff, a small, round table appeared from the floor at the side as though it protruded out. The plates atop the table had sandwiches, manjuu, sausages, fried pastries and the like, with plenty of steam rising up.

It was a compelling stimulation to our stomachs, having only sipped at the watery soup and gnawed at the rock hard bread from yesterday night, but it appears Eugeo felt guilty for enjoying feasts or reading books while on a rescue mission for Alice. He looked at me with conflicting emotions, so I shrugged my shoulders and voiced out words that sounded a little like excuses.

"Despite how tough the battle against Eldrie was when he was alone, it becomes impossible to break through if you add in that bow-wielding integrity knight riding on that flying dragon. Let's rest a little and revise our tactics. This place does seem safe and our Lives fell by quite a bit, after all."

"Yes. As there are charms cast over it, those wounds will immediately heal as well if you eat. Before that, both of you, hold out your right hands."

Eugeo and I obediently presented our shackled right hands at the girl's words that gave no leeway for refusal. With two waves of the staff onto them, the grim iron rings broke much too easily, falling onto the ground with the chains.

Eugeo appeared even more conflicted while stroking his wrist that attained freedom after roughly two whole days, but suddenly let out a big sneeze. Thinking back about it, he fell into the fountain headfirst during the battle with Eldrie and had his entire body drenched. At this rate, the possibility of the flu bad status being imposed upon him was high.

"...It appears you would do best to warm up that body before having a meal. It may be narrow, but there is a proper bathroom at the end of the passage there, so go. The food and books won't be running away."

Perhaps he thought that he really shouldn't be sleeping here, so Eugeo finally nodded apologetically.

"...Thank you, kindly allow me to take up your offer then, Ca... Cardinal-san. Erm... roughly where are those records of the world's creation?"

Cardinal lifted up the stick, and then pointed out a corner with a noticeably more crowded set of large bookshelves, rather high up.

"The history gallery is beyond that staircase."

"Thank you very much! ...Then, please excuse me."

Giving a curt bow, Eugeo sneezed once more before he quickly vanished into the passage between the bookshelves.

Cardinal watched him go off from behind and muttered in a whisper.

"...Regrettably, the records of the world's creation here are written by scribes, as dictated by the highest minister of the Axiom Church."

I turned towards the girl's large hat and lowered my voice as I asked.

"...Then there really aren't any gods in this world? No Stacia, no Solus, no Terraria... and no Vector either?"

"They don't exist."

Cardinal's reply was extremely succinct.

"The legends believed by the masses of the Underworld were fabricated and propagated for no more than the sake of establishing the church's rule. The gods' names are registered as super-accounts for emergencies, but not a single human from outside has ever logged in for that purpose."

Trifling as it was, a part of my doubts did disappear with those words. Looking intently into those burnt-brown eyes, I spoke.

"You aren't an inhabitant of the Underworld, huh. You're similar to those from outside of this world... someone like a system supervisor."

"Yes. And that applies to you as well, unregistered one, Kirito."

".....Aah, that's true."

It had been two years and two months since I woke up in this world. I had always maintained the unshakable conviction that this was not a true parallel world, but a virtual world generated by humans of the real world.

An intense, strong emotion that even I didn't expect welled up from within myself and I took a deep breath, and then exhaled it. There were too many questions that I should ask, making it difficult to choose one to start with. However, there was one that I must confirm before all other.

"The ones who created the Underworld are called Rath... *R, a, t, h*. Is that right?"

"Indeed."

"And you are the Cardinal System. An autonomous program with the purpose of regulating the virtual world."

The girl's eyes slightly twitched open the moment I said so.

"My, so you know about that. So you've come into contact with those of my kind on that side?"

"...Well, yeah."

That's putting it lightly. In a certain sense, it could have been said to be my ultimate enemy in those two years I fought in Aincrad. But she probably wouldn't be able to relate to that even if I talked about it.

"Still... as far as I know, the Cardinal System shouldn't have a personified interface packaged with it. Just... what are you? What are you doing in a place like this?"

Cardinal gave a faint wry smile at my consecutive questions. While pushing the curly, chestnut hair that drooped onto her forehead into her hat with her fingertips, she spoke in a voice that was sweet yet seasoned.

"Telling that story would take a long... a very long time. The reason behind why am I isolating myself in this library room... the reason behind why am I waiting for contact with you... the story behind it would take longer than you could imagine..."

She kept silent, as though she was seized by anxiety, for an instant, but immediately raised her face and continued.

"I shall summarize it as much as I can. ...Firstly, eat; those wounds hurt, do they not?"

I had completely forgotten about the pain after all these developments beyond my wildest expectations, but my chest struck by Eldrie's whip and my right foot pierced by the archer throbbed the instant it was pointed out.

Doing as I was told, I took one of the piping hot meat manjuu from the table, opened my mouth wide, and bit into it. Its taste surpassed or at least wasn't inferior to those meat buns from Gottlo's store that I tended to buy and eat on the go when I sneaked out of the Sword Mastery Academy, and I ended up greedily stuffing my cheeks in a trance. Perhaps due to some sort of command inserted into it, each bite made the pain fade away and even sealed up the wounds.

"...As expected of the supervisor... Able to manipulate even the parameters of food, huh?"

Upon murmuring in wonder, Cardinal made a hmph sound through her nose.

"You're mistaken on two counts. I am currently not the supervisor. And all I can manipulate are the objects within this library room."

Swiveling behind just like that, she walked towards a passage that bent with the wall. I rushed to carry as many manjuu and sandwiches as I could before checking the passage that linked to the bathroom on the other side. Much time needed to be spent warming up to prevent the flu status, so Eugeo shouldn't be getting out for a while...

".....Nn? Wait... if you can heal wounds through food, shouldn't it be possible to prevent flu that way too?"

When I pointed that out, Cardinal turned to me for an instant and grinned. She apparently wanted to take Eugeo out of the picture for a bit, using the bath as an excuse.

Proceeding on at the back of the unexpectedly scheming sage, we encountered frequent forks and slopes, one after another, making me rapidly lose track of our location within the Great Library Room. When the magical food that I sloppily ate on the way nearly ran out, a circular space surrounded by bookshelves appeared in our path. In its middle was a single table with two antiquated chairs encircling it.

Airily sitting down upon one of the chairs, Cardinal pointed her staff at the opposite one without any further words. I, too, sat down as instructed.

In that moment, two cups of tea appeared atop the table. Cardinal held up the cup in front of herself and drank a mouth of it before she calmly began the conversation.

"Have you ever thought about this? About the reason for the existence of *feudalism* in this peaceful artificial world."

I recalled the meaning of the unfamiliar word from Cardinal's lips was «feudalism», but it still took about two seconds.

Feudalism. It was a governance structure where land was held by nobles as lords and a ruler who reigned over them. In short, the type of setting common in fantasy novels and games—that said, it's more uncommon to find those that don't use it—involving emperors, kings, earls, barons, etc; a class system like that of the Middle Ages.

There was no doubt that the Underworld used a world setup imaged on Europe in the Middle Ages, so I had never felt the existence of nobles and emperors to be out of place. Hence, I was at a complete loss for words at Cardinal's question.

"Why... well... that's because the creators designed it that way, isn't it?"

"Nay."

The ends of Cardinal's small lips faintly showed signs of twisting into a smile with her immediate rebuttal, as though she predicted my answer.

"The humans from outside that gave life to this world prepared nothing more than a mere vessel. The ones who produced the current societal structure were no other than its inhabitants, the masses of the Underworld."

"I see..."

True, this wasn't a story for Eugeo's ears.

After slowly nodding, I finally remembered something I had to make sure of, first of all. The girl recognized the existence of Rath in the real world. If that's the case, she...

"Wa-Wait a minute. Are you able to contact the real world? Do you have the means to communicate with the other side?"

I eagerly asked, but Cardinal denied it, disconcerted.

"Fool, if I was capable of that, I wouldn't have been shut in a dusty place like this for hundreds of years. Unfortunately, that person is the only one who holds the means... no one other than the highest minister."

"I... I see..."

I was curious in who exactly that highest minister was supposed to be as well, but I figured to leave it aside for now and placed my bets on the last sliver of hope.

"Then, at least tell me what month and day it is in the real world right now... or maybe where is my body in the real world right now..."

"I apologize; I am unable to access the system domain as I am now. Even the scope of the data domain I am able to browse is of nothing more than an insignificant amount. I am an existence far more powerless in comparison to the Cardinal you knew of on the other side."

I, too, felt bad looking at Cardinal, who had a depressed expression that suited her age, perhaps due to the shame from that fact, and exaggeratedly shook my head.

"No, just knowing the real world exists was more than I could ask for. I apologize for butting in the conversation... erm, you were talking about the reason behind the feudalism?"

Returning to the topic, I pondered for a short while before continuing.

"That would be... because someone had to supervise over the preservation of public order, allocation of products, and things like that, wouldn't it?"

"Fm. However, you ought to know this as well. The inhabitants of this world generally do not oppose the law. There are no acts of causing hurt, robbery or monopolization of crops. Diligence and impartiality are deeply ingrained, so wouldn't developing into a communist society serve it better? Do you believe that this world with a population of merely a hundred thousand or so require a class system as excessive as to involve the presence of four emperors and over a thousand nobles who label themselves aristocrats?"

"A hundred thousand..."

The total population of the Underworld that I found out for the first time. Cardinal said "merely", but I, on the other hand, was surprised by its enormity. Rather than a research into artificial intelligence, this was already a true simulation of a civilization.

But certainly, twenty five thousand subjects ruled over by a single emperor utterly paled in comparison with the Roman Empire or the Franks of ancient times. So I suppose it would have been more

believable for this feudalism to be created based on an example from reality, rather than arising from some sort of need.

And once again, Cardinal threw more unanticipated words at me, when I cocked my head in puzzlement.

"I mentioned that gods do not exist in this world earlier. However, during the creation of the world—four hundred and fifty years in the past, there were some who resembled them. Back when Central Centoria was merely a small village... there were four of those «gods»."

"Eh, four hundred and fifty years? Wasn't it three hundred and eighty? I mean, right now, it's Human World Calendar..."

The sage shrugged her shoulders in exasperation at my slightly off-topic question.

"I do believe I said this earlier; that creation myth was a literary work of the Church. The origin of the current calendar is nothing more than one fabricated after that era."

"I-Is that so? So... you were talking about those four «gods»? They were definitely human... the staff from Rath that created this world?"

It seems I gave the proper response this time round, as Cardinal nodded with a faint smile.

"Oh, so you've figured that much out, haven't you."

"...The chicken should have come before the egg in this world, after all. There were some who raised up the artificial flutlight babies at the start... otherwise, there would be no explanation for why they are able to speak and write in Japanese here."

"That is a logical deduction. It is exactly as you have said. In the beginning... when I was still the supervisor without a consciousness of my own, four from the outside world made their way to this land and brought up eight «children» as farming families in two houses. From reading and writing, cultivation of crops, rearing of livestock... to what would become the basis of the Taboo Index later, the morality of good and evil."

"They were truly gods... the responsibilities must have been huge. A single careless word would have influenced the fate of human society later on."

Cardinal nodded with an exceedingly stern face when I said «a single careless word».

"Indeed. I have deliberated over these and arrived at a single conclusion only after being confined within this library room, but... getting to the point, why would feudalism exist in this world that originally had no need for it? Should an aberrant law system like the Taboo Index and moreover, the nobles who make use of its loopholes for their own profits and pleasure exist? There is no longer a single answer to those questions."

While pushing up those small round glasses, the girl continued in her dignified voice.

"It was also clear that the «original four» had intellect of the highest grade as humans, seeing as they brilliantly accomplished the difficult mission they were charged with. Concurrently, they gave the Underworld inhabitants an innate sense of virtue, so they must have been ethically respectable as well. However, that did not apply to all four of them."

"...What did you say...?"

"There was a single one who had excellent intellect, but lacked ethics. That person «corrupted» them, so to speak. One or two among those children brought up. It was likely unintentional, but... still, one's true nature cannot be hidden. Greed that served their own self-interest, such as the desire for wealth

and dominance, got handed down as well. Those children became the ancestors. Of the nobles and emperors ruling the current Human World and the higher ministers of the Axiom Church..."

Lacked ethics... she said?

In short, the source of the malice held by some of the nobles was someone within Rath's core staff? And that evil was mentally inherited down the generations and in the end, gave birth to humans like Raio Antinous and Humbert Zizek, huh.

I could feel a sudden chill sweeping through my whole body. In the real world, I was linked up to the STL at Rath's headquarters somewhere, unconscious. I couldn't help but shiver at the thought that a person with the same nature as Raio might be prowling about right beside me.

Did I know that person? I tried to call to mind the faces of the staff in Rath in my memory, but the only ones who immediately appeared were the researcher-in-charge, Higa Takeru, and the mysterious government worker who introduced me to Rath, Kikuoka Seijirou. Of course, there were several other staff members at the Rath branch in Roppongi, but I had nothing but indistinct memories of them. At any rate, my part-time job at Rath was over two years ago in the past from my point of view.

The question was whether that person merely had strong egoism and greed, or if that person sneaked into Rath while hiding some sort of motive. Making off with the research and selling it off, or perhaps... something like sabotage?

"Cardinal... do you know the names of those «original four»?"

Unfortunately, the girl slowly shook her head at my question.

"The authority to access the entire system domain is required to find that out."

"No... I'm sorry for asking things like that over and over again."

Anyway, nothing could be done even if I knew their names right now. The need to gain the means of contacting the other side certainly did strengthen, though.

Shifting my weight onto the back of the chair, I took a sip of the sweet-smelling tea before returning to the topic.

"I see... If only a small portion among the Underworld people possess a desire for dominance, it's only natural for them to be the elites. It'll be like mixing lions into a herd of gazelles."

"And they are similar to an irremovable virus program too. When a child is born from its parents in this world, it inherits not only their outer appearances, but their natures as well, you see. The lower class nobles who often married with commoners did dilute their egoism, however..."

I recalled the sense of justice and benevolence of the sixth class aristocrats, Ronye and Tiezé, which was truly worthy of respect with those words from Cardinal.

"So that means... if marriages between fellow nobles were to continue on the other hand, they would keep their egoism, that's how it is?"

"Indeed. That essence is within the four imperial families and the higher ministers of the church. And standing at the summit of that whole lot is the absolute ruler of this Human World... the highest minister of the Axiom Church and even the system supervisor at this current point, a single woman. She calls herself by a name, arrogant beyond all others, «Administrator»."

"Admini... strator."

Its meaning in English was «administrator» and it was also the term used to denote a «supervisor» in certain operating systems; I softly repeated the name. Come to think of it, I seem to recall Integrity

Knight Eldrie speaking out that name when he caused that mysterious phenomenon that released light. In other words, the entity whom the integrity knights swore fealty to was the highest minister, Administrator... that's how it was?

Upon reaching that point in my thoughts, I finally noticed the presence of another important bit of information within Cardinal's words.

"Eh... y-you said she was female? That highest minister?"

I held the preconception that the one at the top of the Axiom Church was an elderly male since a pretty long time ago, but it appears that was wrong. Cardinal nodded and added a scowl that would lose to no other.

"Indeed, that is so. And... although I find it repulsive, that person could be said to be my elder twin sister as well."

"What... what do you mean?"

Unable to grasp the notion, I asked back, but the sage who assumed the form of a girl did not seem like she would be answering anytime soon.

As though she was disgusted at herself, she gazed at her own white, slender right hand for a while before languidly opening her mouth.

"...I shall speak of it in turn... It was roughly three and a half hundred years ago when the absolute governing organization, the Axiom Church, was formed. In other words, that would be a hundred years after the start of the *simulation*, you see. Humans of the Human World married at around twenty years old at that time and bore an average of five children, so those of the fifth generation had already exceeded six hundred. Adding their parents and their generation would bring it close to a thousand, though..."

"Wa-Wait a minute. In the first place, what are the systems for marriage and childbirth in this world?"

I panicked upon realizing it wasn't a good question for a girl around ten years old, regardless of her actual age, after I instinctively asked, grasping at the opportunity to resolve a question I had had for two years. Still, Cardinal replied breezily, without raising a single eyebrow.

"I am unable to affirm without the proper knowledge on acts of reproduction between humans in the real world, but the deed itself should be much the same as in reality, judging from the structural principles of fluctlights. Only after a male-female couple who registered a marriage in the system accomplishes the deed, will there be a certain probability for the mother to become pregnant. To be specific, a new fluctlight model will be loaded into an empty cube within the Light Cube Cluster, with a part of the parents' external elements and their patterns of thoughts and character inserted, which is then created as a newborn baby."

"H-Hah, I see... What did you mean by marriage registration?"

"It's a simple system command. It takes the form of pledging a marriage to the god, Stacia. The village chief would be the one to conduct it in the original era, but after churches were established in the various areas, the ceremonies were held only by the monks or nuns there."

"Hmm..... —Ah, sorry for going off topic. Please continue your story."

Cardinal gently nodded and resumed the explanation at my insistence.

"Tens of years after the «original four» logged out, the inhabitants that reached a thousand in numbers were already ruled by several lords. As those that inherited the weapon named egoism from their ancestors earnestly continued to expand the land they owned, they ended up making the youth

deprived of land for cultivation nearby work for them as tenant farmers. There were some among them not content with their social positions that set off from the central, cultivating new lands in remote regions as well, though."

"I see, so those youth built up towns and villages like Zakkaria or Rulid."

"That's right. ...The lords that ruled over the central naturally held enmity for each other, so there was a long period of time without marriages in between them. However, something similar to a political marriage between two families of lords once happened for the first time... as a result, a single female baby was born. That baby had a lovely appearance, like that of angels, and possessed a level of egoism higher than any seen before among all of the flutlights in the Underworld... She was named Quinella."

A light drifted about Cardinal's eyes that stared into space as though they were wandering through the far-off past.

The flames of the various lamps mounted in between the bookshelves surrounding the small room cast intricate shadows over the girl's pale cheeks. Within the tranquility where one could even hear a pin drop, a gentle voice, yet tinged with sorrow, flowed on.

"At that time, the one who assigned the sacred tasks for the children in Centoria—it was already at a scale closer to a town than a village by then—was the one and only lord, Quinella's father. Upon reaching ten years of age, Quinella showed talent in various fields, swordsmanship and sacred arts, song and weaving; everyone thought she would serve her time finely, whichever task it was. However, because of that—her father thought the beautiful Quinella was too dear to work outside in the town..."

Cardinal showed a faint, wretched smile.

"Foolish possessiveness. So that Quinella may be within his grasp at any time, he bestowed a sacred task that did not exist until then, «sacred arts research», upon his daughter. Quinella demonstrated her intelligence freely, deep within her residence and started on the analysis of sacred arts... or in other words, system commands. Until then, the Underworld inhabitants knew only the mere fundamental commands, without a single person considering the meaning behind the terms making up each command. That was sufficient, for day-to-day purposes, at least."

True, Eugeo and the other villagers back when I was at Rulid Village did nothing more than pulling out the «Stacia Window» for checking Life.

"However... Quinella, possessing an alarming amount of tenacity and insight as a child, continued her analysis on the meaning of the terms used in commands. On the words, «*generate*», «*element*», and «*object*», for example, from a wondrous parallel world. And with several extremely fundamental commands as the base, Quinella finally worked out the «*Thermal Arrow*» art through her own efforts. The system commands that were originally a tool for nothing more than making life convenient became an offensive art to injure live targets. —Now, Kirito."

Suddenly called out, I blinked as I looked into Cardinal's face.

"Do you understand the reason why your sacred arts usage authority level... in other words, the value of your «*system access authority*» steeply increased?"

"Aah... well, more or less. It's probably because I fought monsters... a group of goblins in a cave and drove them away."

"Indeed, that was it. This world was originally designed for its inhabitants to battle with invading enemies from outside to strengthen oneself. That would be needed only after it enters the «load experimental phase», however... At any rate, to raise one's authority level, there is no choice but to

defeat enemies from outside or through steady usage of the commands. Quinella found out that arrangement on her own at the mere age of eleven. When she tested shooting the flame arrows with the harmless kintobi foxes within the forest near her home as targets, that is..."

"...So, that means the targets to defeat for raising one's authority are not limited to enemies from outside... the monsters in the land of darkness...?"

"Indeed. the so-called «experience points increase» occurs whenever any sort of mobile unit, including humans, is annihilated. Of course, the humans in this world do not murder other humans and most humans wouldn't try to kill harmless animals either. However, it is difficult for those who strongly possess the genes of nobility. They hunt for sport and as a result, strengthen that authority without the intention to... And the one who carried it out with a clear intent was the eleven year old Quinella."

Cutting off her words for the time being there, Cardinal gently held the tea cup to her lips. With it still engulfed in her two hands, she quietly resumed talking.

"...Having noticed the sacred art usage authority rises with the murder of beasts, the girl sneaked out from home each night and continued the slaughter without alarming her family or the villagers. I would have trembled at Quinella's actions if I had a consciousness back when I controlled the Underworld. The girl emotionlessly... no, she might have felt a sort of euphoria as she cleared off all of the wild beast units near Centoria in a single night. The deceased units were replenished as long as the system commanded it... and utterly annihilated once again the next night..."

—To a VRMMO gamer like myself, that should have been an extremely typical course of action. During the SAO era, I repeated that sort of «hunt» every single day and strengthened my own status. That was the basic nature of MMOs.

However, cold sweat now ran down my back after hearing Cardinal's words.

A young girl wandering about in a dark forest late at night, wearing pajamas and indifferently incinerating any animals she found to death. No single word but «nightmare», was fit to describe that image.

As though infected by my dread, Cardinal exerted even more force in holding the cup between her two hands.

"Quinella's authority level continued to rise infinitely. Making steady progress on the analysis of commands as well, the girl eventually became able to handle numerous kinds of arts that the masses back then felt similar to miracles, such as Life recovery and weather prediction. The inhabitants of Centoria believed Quinella was a child sent by the gods and revered her, her father the first to do so. ...Reaching thirteen of age, Quinella possessed a truly divine beauty. Showing her gentle smile, Quinella realized it was time to fully satisfy her endless desire for domination. Rather than ownership over land like lords; rather than practicing the sword like warriors; she went with a definite, powerful method... by deceiving with the name of god..."

Having cut off her speech, Cardinal shifted her vision upwards—towards the faraway canopy high up in the Great Library Room, or perhaps the real world that laid beyond it.

"It was the greatest blunder made by the humans who constructed this world. To explain away the inexplicable effects of the system commands with a concept like «god». In my opinion... an existence like god is a drug too benign for those living beings known as humans. Soothing all pain, pardoning all acts of cruelty. Fortunately, I cannot hear the voice of god with my lack of emotions..."

Returning her burnt-brown pupils to the cup, the girl gently knocked against the porcelain edge with a finger on her left hand. Hot liquid instantly gushed up from the bottom, filling the nearly empty cup with piping hot tea.

"Blind belief played a part as well, with miracles like those happening before their eyes and explained as the work of god. ...There were already none who doubted Quinella's words after she instantaneously healed a man who suffered an injury during farm work and predicted a storm's arrival a whole three days in advance. She told lords of her father's status and below that a place to pray to god was necessary. To bring about even more wondrous abilities, that is. A white marble tower was immediately erected in the middle of the village. The site was small at that time as well, with a height of merely three stories... but indeed, that was truly the foundation of this Central Cathedral. And at the same time, the start of the three and a half hundred years history of the Axiom Church."

The tale of the holy woman, Quinella, of ancient times told by Cardinal forced a certain person to mind. I heard it from Eugeo and Selka without actually meeting the person myself, but—she was the girl who showed talent in the sacred arts from childhood and was bestowed the sacred task of being a sister apprentice to the church, Alice Schuberg.

But Eugeo recalled Alice being more gentle than anyone else when she was in Rulid. Not to mention she was Selka's elder sister. It was awfully hard to imagine her sneaking out from home night after night, annihilating beasts in a forest.

How did Alice increase her system access authority, then?

My focus, submerged within the depths of that doubt, was pulled back by Cardinal's voice.



"The inhabitants of those days believed that Quinella was a female shaman blessed by the god, Stacia, without exception. They prayed to the white tower in the morning and evening and donated a part of their harvest without hesitation. The lords unrelated to Quinella by blood were unsettled by the girl's existence at the start, but... still, Quinella was stubborn. She made all of the lords into nobles in the name of god, or in other words, she appointed them to the aristocracy. There were still some among the ordinary farmers that held a certain extent of resentment over the lords' exploitations at that time, but they couldn't disobey when it was an authority recognized by god. And those lords that became nobles, too, judged it more beneficial to obey, rather than oppose Quinella."

Returning the tea cup to its dish with a dull clink, Cardinal looked straight at me as she spoke.

"It took a while to get to this point, but this is the reason behind the existence of feudalism in the Underworld."

"I see... So it wasn't a class system that developed from the need for societal improvement, but one for control... huh. I suppose it would be only natural that the higher class nobles don't feel a sense of duty."

I murmured and Cardinal nodded with a frown.

"I doubt you've seen it with your own eyes, but the behavior of greater nobles and the imperial families within their own private land is truly atrocious. It would be impossible to predict how much of a hell it would have been if it wasn't for the Taboo Index prohibiting acts of murder and causing hurt."

"...The one who created that Taboo Index is that Quinella-san in question too, right? Does that mean that... even she had some moral sense?"

"Fm, I wonder."

Cardinal made a cute noise with her nose.

"—Even after my many years of deliberation, I still do not understand the reason why the inhabitants of this world do not violate the rules established through their superiors' authorities. I am no exception to this rule. As I do not regard the Axiom Church as a superior existence, I am not bound by the Taboo Index... but still, I am unable to infringe the various rules placed upon myself as the program, Cardinal. You could say that the act of being confined within this place for hundreds of years is the result of my inability to oppose those commands."

"The inability to oppose superior rules... does that apply to Quinella too?"

"Indeed. As she was the one who created the Taboo Index, Quinella is not bound by that foolish law... but still, she did not disobey the various rules set down by her parents when she was young and is now driven on by a new command. Think about it, do you believe that person would be satisfied with killing only animals if it wasn't for her parents teaching her to «not injure people»? She would have obviously murdered humans who are more efficient in increasing her authority level instead."

Goose bumps rose on my back with a chill yet again. Holding that back, I moved my mouth.

"Fm... in other words, injuring others was a taboo from the start, ingrained into the children by the «original four», you mean? Quinella simply put that into writing and added other minor details... that's it?"

"That's the rough idea. However, it was surely not out of some desire for world peace. —Reaching her mid-twenties, Quinella became increasingly beautiful, the tower became ever taller and held countless people as disciples. Similar white towers were erected in the villages of each area and upon formally naming it the Axiom Church, Quinella's system of rule became all the more concrete even during then. However... as the population steadily increased and the land occupied by people expanded, Quinella

became uneasy of the potential places beyond the reach of her own eyes. Wouldn't someone who noticed the secret behind the sacred arts usage authority like herself appear in the remote regions, she questioned. And there, for the sake of ensuring her all-encompassing rule, she decided to create a law on a corporeal medium. Loyalty to the Axiom Church was written in the first clause and the prohibition of murder was recorded in the second. Why, you ask?"

Keeping her silence for a moment, Cardinal stared fixedly at me before she continued.

"—Naturally, because one would notice that one's authority level increases after killing a human. That was the only reason; that is why the church prohibits murder. There isn't any sort of moral, ethical or benevolent reason in that single sentence."

I instinctively tried to protest while slightly shocked.

"Bu...but acts of murder and causing hurt were ethically taboo as established by the «original four», right? Wouldn't people possess that sense of morals even without the church saying so?"

"However, what would happen if the parents failed to teach that? The probabilities are low, but what if there were children separated from their parents, or in other words, their initial superior existence, immediately after birth, without receiving any guidance on ethics? If that child possessed the genes of nobles, there was the possibility of the child following its own desires and killing the humans around, attaining an authority level beyond that of Quinella. To reduce that possibility to the minimum, Quinella compiled the book that would become the Taboo Index, published it and placed it into the possessions of each and every town or village. Parents were assigned the duty to teach children the Taboo Index from its first page after they learn language. Look here, if the humans of this world appear to be good, diligent and overflowing with benevolence, that was merely because it makes things more convenient for them, the absolute governing organization, the Axiom Church, that is."

"B... but..."

I was unable to take in Cardinal's words without resistance and endlessly shook my head left and right.

I did not want to believe that the respectable personalities of the people I interacted with at Rulid Village, on my travels and at the Sword Mastery Academy—Selka, Ronye, Tiezé, Sortiliena-senpai... and beyond all others, Eugeo, were all things forced onto them by programming.

"...That's not all to it, right? Wasn't there still that little... original form of the fluctlight thing? Something conferred onto the souls of us humans from the very start..."

"You should have already laid your eyes on proof contrary to that, haven't you?"

Taken aback at Cardinal's words, I blinked two, three times.

"Eh...?"

"Those goblins that mercilessly tried to kill Eugeo and you. Did you not think that they were not merely codes from a program? That was truly the form assumed when the fluctlight model is exposed to orders completely opposite to the Taboo Index... to kill, to rob, and to obey their desires. Look here, those are no longer «people»; in a certain sense, they are exactly the same as you."

"....."

I sank into silence for a period of time.

I did guess that was the case. Those monsters I crossed swords with under the mountain range at the edge, slightly less than two years ago—the goblins' conversations and gestures were truly natural, without even a shred of resemblance to the programming for monsters and NPCs appearing in

ordinary VRMMO games. Above all, the glitter of desire that dwelled within their yellow eyes was not something that could be represented with a mere texture map. Definitely.

But then again, if I were to judge them as «humans» in possession of fluctlights as well, I couldn't ignore the issue any longer. To help Selka, Eugeo and I killed two of those beasts... no, people, but they were merely obeying the desire written into their souls. Eugeo was able to break the restraints of the Taboo Index, so there ought to be a possibility that those goblins, too, were able to resist the commands to kill and steal. Despite that, I firmly believed them to be evil merely because they were goblins with frightening outward appearances and swung my sword down without any hesitation...

"Bother not, fool."

Cardinal's words snapped at me, as I deeply hung my head down without noticing.

"Do you plan on declaring that you will become god as well? No answer will reveal itself even if you spend a hundred years or two worrying over it. Even now—I am still at a loss even after waiting all this time for a chance to finally meet you..."

Upon lifting my face, Cardinal's thin brows came together into a frown as she stared into the depths of her cup. She continued her words as though reciting a poem in that posture.

"I, too, was once a supervisor without a shred of hesitation. I had not a single thought for the tiny beings squirming within my palm, running the world with an unchanging law. However, when I gained a human body like so... developing an attachment towards life, there were some things I began to understand... It is likely that the ones who constructed this world did not understand the true meaning behind what they have created either. They, too, were not gods, after all... even if they knew of Quinella's deplorable deeds, they might display interest, but not distress. Despite the certainty of the hell, that words would fail to describe, this world would become if it enters the load experimental phase at this rate..."

"About... about that, what exactly is that load experiment? You mentioned it earlier, but..."

Interrupting the conversation, Cardinal raised her lowered eyes and gave a light nod.

"Let's return to the story, I must explain it in sequence. —The part where Quinella created the Taboo Index and distributed it over the entire world, was it? Due to that book, the Axiom Church's rule became ever sturdier. After all, Quinella revised the index time after time, tightly binding the masses with a sense of moral that changed to suit the church's convenience while eliminating the sources of all troubles that occur in daily life. Writing down even the prohibition of access to a swamp that was stated as the source of an endemic disease and the name of the grass that causes sheep unable to be milked when eaten... If one were to not think and simply follow whatever was in that book, not a single problem will occur. The masses prayed to and believed in the church as the years passed, without a single person suspicious of the loyalty to the church mentioned in the first clause."

It was a truly absolute reign. An ideal society completely without starvation, rebellion, or revolution—

"There was a boom in Centoria's population, with progress on architecture techniques through the application of large-scale commands, transforming the once-village into a splendid city in the twinkling of an eye. The grounds of the Axiom Church expanded in the same way, with the tower steadily increasing in height... Come to think of it, this Central Cathedral is likely a representation of Quinella's insatiable desires. She did not know what was enough. Reaching thirty, forty of age, her features declined even further. That said, it wasn't like she indulged in gourmet food and lust like the greater nobles. From a certain point in time, Quinella showed herself no more to those of the world, confining herself within the highest floor of the ever-rising tower and earnestly immersed herself purely in the

analysis of the sacred arts. She sought more authority, more sacraments... enough to transcend the absolute limit set upon herself: her end, «Life»."

In this world, the status, Life, was a cruelly vivid property.

Steadily increasing through growth, reaching its peak in the twenties or thirties, or when reversing, a gentle reduction until zero at sixty to eighty of age. My Life increased by quite a bit in these two years as well. It certainly was scary having this value decrease day after day. All the more so, if you were the absolute ruler with the world in your palm.

"However... no matter how many commands she analyzed, even if she got a hold of arts that could manipulate even the weather, the limit of Life was... in other words, the one thing she could do nothing about was her life span. Manipulating that was limited to those who possessed supervisor rights... the supervisors from the outside world or perhaps the autonomous control system, Cardinal. Quinella's Life steadily reduced day after day. Reaching fifty years old, reaching sixty years old... all traces of her divine beauty that once bewitched people's hearts faded unnoticed, faltering even while she walked, before she finally became unable to leave her magnificent bed in the bedroom at the highest point of the world. Taking out the Stacia Window once every hour, staring at the value of her Life being steadily shaved away..."

Suddenly cutting off, Cardinal hugged her small frame with both hands as though she felt a shiver.

"...But still, Quinella never gave up. It was a dreadful tenacity... Testing out each and every combination of sounds in her hoarse voice, day and night, struggling to call upon some forbidden command. —That endeavor should not have borne any fruit. To put it into probability, it would be like flipping a thousand coins and having them all land on heads... no, the chance was smaller than that... However... still..."

I was assailed by a sudden, indescribable chill, shaking as my body shivered. I could clearly see Cardinal—the girl, who declared herself to be an emotionless system, evidently feeling some sort of fear.

"...On a night when she was finally on the brink of death... everything would end with a single minor injury, with a nudge from illness... Quinella finally opened it: the forbidden door. Through some impossible coincidence... or perhaps with a helping hand from some entity from the outside world, or so I think. —Allow me to show you, even if you can't use it."

Cardinal held the staff with her left hand and lifted it, enunciating as though she was whispering.

"System call! Inspect entire command list!"

In that instant, a heavy sound effect I had never heard before rang out and a relatively large purple window opened before Cardinal.

That was all. No divine light raining down, no angels trumpeting, nothing of that sort at all. However, I understood the terrifying effect of that command.

This certainly was the ultimate sacred art. So much that it must not exist by nature.

"It appears you figured it out. Indeed... a catalogue of all existing system commands is recorded on this window. This, too, is a major mistake by the world's creators. They definitely should have deleted this particular command... the instant when the «original four» that needed it left this world."

Cardinal waved the staff and the forbidden list vanished.

"Quinella opened her hazy eyes and stared at the window. And she understood everything, became ecstatic and literally leapt to her feet. The command she sought was noted down at the end of the list.

A command in the event that a pressing need to adjust the world balance from inside arises... one that steals all authority from the Cardinal System, to become a true god..."

Suddenly, that scene vividly showed up within my mind.

The highest floor of a tower tall enough to reach the clouds. Nothing but the undulating black clouds in the starless night sky and violet lightning could be seen in all directions through the surrounding windows.

There was only a single canopy in the middle of the empty, wide room. But its owner was not lying on it. Long hair that lost its color was disheveled upon the soft mattress, a boney figure dancing a strange dance with distorted motions. Two arms thrust out of the white silk pajamas like withered branches, howls of delight flowing from that throat bent backwards. With the thunder that started rumbling, raging ever harder, as its accompaniment, the forbidden spell to usurp the authority of god was woven together in a shrill voice, like that of an eerie bird...

This Underworld wasn't an AI experiment any longer, perhaps not even a simulation of a virtual civilization.

Even the staff from Rath who created this world... even Kikuoka Seijirou, Higa Takeru and the rest had lived only thirty-plus years at most. However, the incarnation of pure desire for domination, Quinella, was already eighty when she achieved administrative rights. And if Cardinal's words proved right, she had piled up closer to another three hundred years since then. No one would be able to imagine just what sort of existence did a being of such intelligence end up as.

Could Kikuoka and the rest really control everything? How much of what was happening here did they understand...?

The black-robed young sage and I stared at each other while grasping onto each of our own anxiety.

Doors do not exist within the Great Library Room... in other words, it ought to be completely isolated from the world outside, but it felt like I heard the low rumbling of thunder from far away.

That ominous noise seemed like a warning for the arrival of a new, and mightiest storm at the path that should have been approaching its end.

(To Be Continued)

Afterword

Hello, this is Kawahara Reki. Thank you very much for reading 'Sword Art Online 11 Alicization Turning'. The subtitle literally means a *turning point*, but whether this volume could be considered a turning point for the Alicization arc in terms of quantity or not... I'm sorry, I still can't say for sure right now...! It's just that the book ends with Kirito and Eugeo, who were living their somewhat contented school lives, encountering a big turning point while the story shifts towards a new stage. And the secret behind the Underworld's creation was finally articulated by a person Kirito met there, possessing a name familiar to him... I certainly can't say drawing attention towards the next volume like that is very honorable, but I'll try my best to deliver volume 12 as fast as I can, so I hope for your support in accompanying these two on their adventures from now on as well.

This is the sixth book to be released this year, so it seems I've yet again maintained my six-books-a-year pace since my debut in 2009. 2012 was an extremely momentous year when with both of my series, Sword Art Online and Accel World, receiving anime adaptations, allowing me to meet many people and gaining a peek into a world new to me, so I believe that had quite an influence on my mindset regarding my work. I do not have all the space needed to write all of that down here, but to summarize it, I believe it would be to «work on my creations seriously, yet while enjoying it». Writing novels is a one-man operation, so I always end up melancholic upon entering my inner space, but I keep it up because I enjoy it; I think that is the basis or principle behind the motivation for literary works, so I wish to return to my roots around here and enjoy writing volume after volume from next year onwards too. I want to maintain my six-books-a-year pace for as long as I can too! Of course, it's not like I'm writing to see the number of my published works increase, but I have a sort of rotten belief that I will never be able to return to my original pace once I slack off with my personality, so I hope to continue my bimonthly releases until the two series, SAO and Accel World, end at least... and here I am, chasing myself into a corner with what I write here (haha).

The new series, 'Progressive', started this year, so SAO ended up with four volumes. I am truly thankful that the illustrator, abec, was able to draw so many wonderful illustrations for the book despite already having an extensive list of work related to the anime. I'm sorry to the editors-in-charge, Miki-shi and Tsuchiya-shi, for being late for all that, all the time. Even this afterword's thirty minutes late!

And please allow me to express my gratitude once again, to everyone who have accompanied me here. I hope for your support in the coming year as well!

A Certain Day in October, 2012 Kawahara Reki